



Cad's Trilogy

Cad's Pick

CHERYL
HOLT

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Cad's Pick

Book #2 of the Cad's Trilogy

CHERYL HOLT

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Chapter One



“NO. ABSOLUTELY NOT.”

Warwick Stone glared at his father, Neville, but Neville could never be shamed or cowed. He glared back, his expression bland and infuriating.

“Why would you automatically refuse?” Neville asked. “You haven’t heard me out.”

“And I don’t intend to *hear* you. Hunter told me you were about to start nagging.” Hunter was Warwick’s older brother. “Your badgering worked on him, but it won’t work on me.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Yes, I’m very sure.”

They were sequestered in a parlor at his father’s newly-inherited town house, seated side by side on comfortable chairs. A warm fire burned in the grate to ward off the evening chill. For once, they were alone, which was odd. They were rich and entitled, so they carried on extravagantly, liking to loaf and wager at their favorite clubs and haunts. It meant they were constantly surrounded by hordes of people.

Neville, especially, liked being in a crowd and the center of attention, so it was an unusual moment, and Warwick was trying to cherish it. But he and Neville had a difficult relationship, so their interactions were never smooth.

“Our situation has changed,” Neville said.

“I realize that fact. I’m not a dunce.”

“That might be debatable.”

Warwick had just returned from an extended holiday in Scotland where he’d reveled outrageously. The end of the stay had culminated with his winning a thousand pounds in a reckless hundred-mile horse race. His friends were still agog over it. It was the sort of antic he and his male kin were renowned for pursuing, and over the centuries, it had delivered all sorts of ruin.

He became more absurd by the month, and it was really quite amazing that he'd lived to be twenty-nine. Yet if he was negligent and foolish, he blamed Neville.

His father had been a worthless parent, and he'd provided no guidance or supervision whatsoever. Warwick's mother had died when he was small, and he and his two brothers, Hunter and Sheridan, had grown up at Neville's country estate of Stone Manor, while Neville had caroused in London.

He'd paid servants to raise them, and they'd been a lazy, unscrupulous bunch who'd had little interest in managing, and no ability to control, three rambunctious boys. Warwick and his brothers had wandered like a trio of abandoned wolf pups. There had been no challenge they didn't accept and no feat they wouldn't attempt.

As adolescents, then adults, they'd simply continued their rash routines, but their deeds were ever more dangerous. They had too much time on their hands, and they were much too brave. They loved trouble and mischief, and they exhibited an irrepressible amount of daring-do that could be astonishing.

Their impulsive conduct was only matched by their immoral tendencies. They possessed all of Neville's worst traits and very few of his good ones. Actually, Neville didn't have many *good* traits. He gambled and chased loose women, and he rarely engaged in any other endeavors. Even though he was fifty, he was still a debauched wretch—and he was proud of it.

"I'm an earl now," Neville said.

"You don't have to remind me."

"It seems as if I should."

"Are you planning to lecture me about how we have responsibilities?"

"Yes. We have a title and a line to protect, and I expect you to help me protect them."

Warwick bristled with exasperation. "You never cared about any of this."

"I'm beginning to care. I *have* to care."

To the bewilderment of nearly every person in the British Empire, Neville was suddenly Earl of Swindon. Hunter, as the oldest son, was Viscount Marston and would be the next earl. Warwick and Sheridan weren't anybody, and Warwick was happy to keep it that way.

Neville had never imagined he'd be earl, so he'd constantly wallowed in vice and sloth, having had no future elevation to weigh him down.

He'd had three brothers, and they'd sired a slew of sons, but they'd proved to be an unlucky and frail lot. One sibling had died, then another. The nephews had

been wiped out too, from accident and disease. The last of them had perished during the prior year, and *voilà!* Like magic, the family's wealth and vast properties had been dumped on Neville.

Neville had to be viewed as a hideous custodian of such a huge windfall, but with it being bestowed, he was acting lucid and reliable. Despite *his* abrupt transformation though, Warwick wasn't fretting over any of it.

Neville had pressured Hunter to wed immediately and produce some heirs. Hunter hadn't been inclined to oblige him, but then, he'd met Hannah Graves, and somehow, he'd become a besotted swain. After a summer of rough events and dicey situations, he'd decided he couldn't live without her.

They'd been married the previous week, in a quick ceremony with a Special License.

Hunter had warned Warwick that Neville felt an inexplicable compulsion for his sons to wed in a hurry. The fact that they'd never wanted to be husbands, that they were devoted cads with disgusting habits, was irrelevant. They had to shuck off their bachelor freedom and tie the knot.

"Why don't *you* marry again?" Warwick asked. "If we need to pack a nursery, why don't you lead the parade? There's nothing stopping you."

"I did my duty to King and Country by siring three boys. It's your turn."

"I don't understand how it's my turn at all. In my estimation, I have no role to play in any of this."

"What if Hunter drops dead tomorrow? You'd be in line after me."

"I'll keep an eye on him," Warwick said. "I'll make sure he survives."

"You think this is a joke."

"No, I don't. I simply fail to see how I've assumed any burden. If you're desperate for more heirs, latch onto another debutante. Every girl in the kingdom would jump at the chance to have you."

That was likely a lie. No sane father would chain his daughter to Neville. Then again, a title erased many sins.

Neville had already been wed twice and had driven both wives to early graves. The first had been Warwick's mother. She'd been an appropriate aristocrat's daughter, but also a pious, bitter harpy, so she'd been exactly the wrong bride for Neville.

Warwick had scant memories of his younger years, but those that remained were filled with his mother shouting, throwing things, and pitching fits because Neville had been such an untrustworthy libertine.

Because of their relentless quarrels, he'd spent his time in the city and had rarely shown his face at Stone Manor, so he'd mostly been a stranger to his children.

His second wife, Susan, had been a pretty, but frivolous ninny, thirty years his junior. He'd seduced her, and when her relatives had learned of her ruination, he hadn't been able to buy himself out of trouble. They'd dragged him to the altar.

She'd been thrilled to glom onto him, but no one had told her that he was a lazy, depraved rat. It had been another union filled with shouting and the pitching of fits, in which Neville had never participated. He simply wouldn't fight with a female.

Susan had recently passed away, so Neville was a widower again. He was a hale and vigorous fifty, and he had the health and wealth to be a husband, but he'd never consider it. No, he'd merely whine and insist his sons should bite the bullet instead.

"I still can't believe Hunter is married," Neville said.

"I never thought I'd live to see it." To Warwick's great astonishment, Neville pulled a kerchief out of his coat and dabbed at his eyes. Warwick was aghast. "What are you doing? Don't tell me you're crying over Hunter's finally being leg-shackled."

"I'm happy for him, and he loves Hannah so much."

"Are you turning sentimental on me? How am I to assess such a stunning change of tune?"

"I'm becoming a romantic in my old age."

"No, you're not. Don't pretend. You don't think *love* exists, and you definitely don't think a good marriage is possible. Neither do I. We've witnessed too many disasters."

"I want Hunter's to be perfect, and I've persuaded myself it will be. Can't I be an optimist for once?"

"I suppose," Warwick grumbled. He adored his brother and wished him the best.

Neville sighed and stared into the fire. He was a handsome man—slender, dapper, stylishly attired. His full head of blond hair, their Stone blond hair, had faded to silver. His blue eyes, the Stone blue eyes, could still dance with merriment when he was engaged in mischief.

He was incredibly debonair, but occasionally, he looked weary, as if his vices were finally grinding him down. He was such a fixture in Warwick's life, and he'd always been a charming, elegant scoundrel. If he wasn't present to make Warwick miserable, the Earth might cease to spin on its axis.

"Matrimony won't kill you," Neville said.

“How can you be sure? It almost killed you. Twice.”

“You’d be better at it than I was.”

“I can’t imagine how, and where would I find a bride anyway? I’m only acquainted with doxies and tarts. They’re the sole kind of females I enjoy.” In that, he and Neville had a lot in common.

“We could choose someone without too much effort. Since my elevation, I’ve been deluged with letters from mothers.”

“Well, that’s totally bizarre,” Warwick said. “What parent would give you her daughter?”

“I wouldn’t be interested, but I’m certainly interested for you boys.”

“You shouldn’t exert yourself on my behalf. I wouldn’t let you pick out the cravat I should wear to supper, let alone a suitable wife.”

Neville ignored the snide remark. “I’ve mostly discounted the inquiries, but every so often, I receive an intriguing one.”

Warwick blew out a heavy breath. “Why are you telling me this? I bet I can guess: You’ve stumbled on the perfect girl.”

Suddenly, his father appeared very sly. “I might have.”

“I’m not getting married,” Warwick sternly complained. “How many times must I repeat myself? And why won’t you listen to me?”

“Our ancestors have held this title for . . . what? Four hundred years? I realize you’re a wastrel, and so am I, but we’re not so negligent that we’d imperil what our elders have protected and passed down to us.”

“Hunter will sire a dozen sons. I’m convinced of it.”

“Are you willing to make that wager? Really, Warwick? What if you’re wrong?”

The question hung in the air between them, and Neville glared at Warwick until he squirmed in his seat. He might have been back at school and being scolded by the headmaster, with a painful caning soon to follow.

Generally, Warwick was indolent and distracted. He was rich enough to be slothful. His great-grandfather had been brilliant at commerce, and he’d wisely invested in exports, imports, and other lucrative endeavors. The family had smart accountants who managed their money, so it increased at an obscene rate.

He didn’t have to work or worry, and he reveled to excess with his dissolute companions. He loved slatterns, and he wallowed with the most beautiful trollops in the demimonde. He was never bored, but because he never applied himself, people thought he was a detached slacker.

But his father was correct: He wasn't so negligent that he'd imperil an earldom. Neville was fifty, and Hunter was thirty. As Warwick's slew of cousins had proved, they were unlucky. What if Hunter walked outside in the morning and was kicked by a horse or run over by a carriage? What then?

Neville was a cunning devil, and Warwick was not a mystery to him. Frequently, he seemed able to read Warwick's mind.

"I've been invited to a hunting party," Neville said, "but I hate hunting."

"You may hate the hunting, but you always like a country house party."

"These days, I'd rather stay in town. I figured you could attend in my place."

Warwick snorted with disgust. "Why am I supposing there will just happen to be a fetching young Miss in attendance and that she's dying to wed me?"

Neville shrugged. "I've known the hostess, Blanche Milton, for decades. I was chums with her deceased husband, Harold."

"That news has me trembling."

"Her daughter, Cassandra, is prepared to marry this year."

"Is she a debutante?"

"No, she's twenty-three."

"She's on the verge of being a spinster," Warwick said. "Why hasn't she wed before now? There must be something wrong with her."

"Apparently, they've been avidly searching, but haven't found a good candidate. She's had numerous offers, but they've rejected them."

"You better not have put my head on her chopping block by claiming I'm ready to select a bride."

"I haven't. I simply informed her that you might come, instead of me."

Warwick smirked. "I can't imagine spending a week locked away in a rural manor, while an aggressive mother throws her anxious daughter in my face."

"She has a huge dowry, with property included in it."

"I don't need money or property."

"Don't be absurd. A man can never have enough of either."

Neville stared him down, his focus even more irksome. Warwick was riveted by the fact that his father was looking older.

"Just attend for me," Neville casually urged. "During the day, you can hunt like mad. Then in the evenings, you can dine and frolic with the blasted girl. See what you think. What can it hurt?"

"I'm positive she'll be horrid, so why bother?"

“Do it for me. Please?”

“You’re nagging, Neville. You promised you wouldn’t.”

“Have I ever previously asked you for a favor?”

Warwick scowled. “No, you haven’t ever.”

“Well, I’m asking for this: Go to Mrs. Milton’s home and be introduced to Cassandra.”

Hunter had warned him that this very conversation was about to occur. Warwick had laughed and insisted Neville could never persuade him, but evidently, he could. Most times, Warwick felt he didn’t have a parent, but obviously, he was a weak-kneed character, desperate to oblige his father and make him happy.

He fussed and fumed, dithered and silently debated, as Neville’s steely gaze dug deep.

“I’ll agree—on one condition,” Warwick ultimately said. “I won’t view it as a marital interview. I won’t assess Miss Milton with an eye toward matrimony. I will socialize and revel and that’s it.”

“Fine. I can consent to that, and we’ll discuss her after you’re back.”

“I’ll have to bring a guest. Probably Holden.”

Holden Drake was his best friend, and he’d keep Warwick from being too bored. Especially if Mrs. Milton or her daughter were exhausting.

The Stone men were renowned for their passion for gorgeous trollops, and Warwick said, “Cassandra Milton better be pretty or I will wring your bloody neck.”

“I’m not acquainted with Cassandra, but her mother—Blanche—was a great beauty when we were younger. I’m sure Cassandra is very attractive.”

Warwick scoffed with derision. “I can’t believe I let you talk me into this.”

“It’s just a hunting party. You love those.”

“It’s *not* a hunting party. Stop being so irritating.”

“May I write to Blanche and tell her you’re coming?”

“Yes, you can tell her, but be abundantly clear that I will be there for the wine, the company, and the horses. She has to understand that I’m not about to marry her insipid daughter. I won’t have Miss Milton mooning over me or her mother bragging about the size of her dowry.”

“I will contact her immediately, and I’ll be very blunt about your attitude. And if you don’t like Cassandra, there are girls lined up everywhere who’d like to meet you.”

Warwick shuddered with dread. “If that is even remotely true, I might have to

find a very high cliff so I can throw myself off of it.”

Chapter Two



“AT LEAST SHE’S FETCHING. You father wasn’t lying about it.”

“She’s vivacious too, but do you like vivaciousness in a girl? You don’t seem the type to me.”

Warwick was standing on the edge of a huge parlor at Blanche Milton’s home of Hill Haven. The furniture had been removed to make room for dancing, and the space was packed with people. For the past two hours, he’d joined in the fun, but currently, he was huddled in a corner and catching his breath, while furtively assessing his possible intended, Cassandra Milton, with his best friend, Holden Drake.

Holden had been eager to accompany him to the country. He’d just gotten engaged himself, and he was already ruining the situation. He possessed all of Warwick’s worst tendencies, particularly his aversion to monogamy and moral conduct, so he’d enthusiastically embraced the chance to escape the city for a week.

He’d brought along his new friend, the recently-widowed, Rowena Smithwaite. A few years earlier, she’d been an heiress whose mother had paraded her through a London Season and had landed her a very elderly husband. The old codger had just died, and Mrs. Smithwaite definitely wasn’t in mourning.

She was now a very rich twenty-five, free of her parents and her deaf spouse, and she could behave in any shocking manner that tickled her fancy. She was swiftly developing a reputation as a tart who was very loose with her favors.

Warwick had received the distinct impression that she was looking to be some lucky man’s mistress and had delivered numerous signals that she’d be delighted if it was Holden or Warwick, but Holden could have her. Warwick never kept a mistress. His brother, Hunter, always had, but Warwick had never met a woman whom he liked enough to form any sort of commitment.

He was happy to romp with any trollop who was interested, and of course, he

was a premier member at London's most exclusive brothel. It was a lot cheaper than doling out funds to a doxy for a house, servants, gowns, and a carriage. Those arrangements ended up with the doxy spewing demands and expecting more than she'd been given. Warwick was never in the mood for that kind of quagmire.

A spirited promenade was in progress, and Cassandra Milton was in the middle of the line. She was blond and blue-eyed, plump and fresh-faced, like a dairymaid in the prime of good health. She was extremely jolly too, her color high, her energy blatant, as she spun and twirled for her partner.

Warwick didn't know if it was her usual condition or if she was merely showing off so he'd notice her.

Since his arrival that morning, she and her mother had been chatty and pleasant. There had been no overt hints about matrimony, no deliberate reminders as to Miss Milton's availability for marriage, for which Warwick was exceedingly grateful. He studied her, trying to imagine himself wed to her, but he couldn't fathom it.

The notion of being a husband was simply beyond him—and probably always would be.

He'd traveled to Hill Haven in his carriage, and Holden and Mrs. Smithwaite had ridden with him. They were both aware of why he was at the party, and they felt the need to offer advice and opinions.

"She seems awfully young to me," Mrs. Smithwaite said.

"She's twenty-three," Warwick told her.

"Is she? I would have guessed eighteen and barely out of the schoolroom."

Holden snorted. "Men like innocent girls, Rowena, so that observation will hardly dissuade him."

Mrs. Smithwaite scoffed at the remark. "You fellows claim you like younger brides, but do you really? Every so often, you have to actually talk to your wife. Could you envision discussing any important topic with her?"

As she posed the question, Warwick scrutinized her, thinking—if he was inclined to have a paramour—she wasn't a bad option. She was petite and voluptuous, with lush auburn hair and coquettish green eyes. She wore expensive gowns, the bodices cut very low, so she was always in danger of falling out of her dress.

When a man stared at her, he immediately began to ponder what she'd look like without her clothes. Perhaps he should steal her from Holden. Might she be worth the bother?

"I have no idea if Miss Milton can carry on a conversation or not," Warwick

said. "I haven't spoken more than a dozen words to her, so I'll have to spend time with her to discover what she's truly like."

"I'm sure you'll be overwhelmed by her maturity and poise." Mrs. Smithwaite's tone was incredibly sarcastic, so maybe she viewed Miss Milton as a rival, which was silly.

The men of their station never let anything interfere with the finer pleasures. They had wives, and they cavorted with trollops, and the two occupied very separate worlds. If Warwick was ever insane enough to wed Miss Milton, then contract with Mrs. Smithwaite to be his mistress, they would inhabit completely different spheres in his life, so issues like jealousy and envy were ridiculous.

"It's stuffy in here," he said. "I think I'll step outside for a bit."

"May I join you?" Mrs. Smithwaite asked. "I'm starting to suffocate too."

Warwick shot a quick glance at Holden, visually begging him to intervene, and Holden said, "You have to stay with me, Rowena. If you trot off with Warwick, all the single ladies will rush over to flirt with me. You know I can't abide so much feminine attention."

Mrs. Smithwaite laughed. "You liar. You enjoy having country maidens fawn over you. If you didn't, you'd have promptly announced your engagement to them. You're keeping it a secret so you can raise their hopes."

"You might be correct."

Holden grinned the grin that had debutantes swooning.

With his black hair and blue eyes, he was typically described as handsome. He was an inch or two shorter than Warwick's height of six feet, but he wasn't nearly as broad in the shoulder or long in the leg. He wasn't rich either, but his deficiencies didn't matter.

His father was an earl, Holden a viscount, and he was pompous about the status it conveyed. He expected people to bow down, and he deemed Mrs. Milton lucky that he'd deigned to be a guest at her party.

She understood herself to be lucky too. Every girl in the neighborhood would be wondering if he might fall madly in love with her, but his fiancée was a cousin and a duke's daughter, and though he might complain about being bound, he would never be tempted away from his betrothal.

Warwick slipped away from them and went out onto the verandah. It was a crisp September night, the sky clear for a change, the moon shining brightly. Lamps illuminated the paths in the garden and, lest Mrs. Smithwaite or Miss Milton hurry

out to ask if he'd like company, he dashed down the stairs and strolled away from the house.

The sounds of merriment faded behind him, and he continued on until it was quiet. Then he halted and gazed at the mansion. It was a grand residence, three stories high, with a center section and two wings on the sides. There were large windows, sturdy chimneys, ivy, turrets.

The grounds were impeccably manicured, the flowers exquisite, the stables clean and airy, the horses in pristine condition. All of it was a testament to the fact that the Miltons had money.

He hadn't pestered his father as to the details of Miss Milton's dowry, but he supposed it would be substantial. If he'd been interested in her—and he definitely wasn't—he might have been excited about what she could supply.

"What am I doing here?" he murmured to the evening breeze.

To his surprise, a female replied with, "I don't know. What *are* you doing?"

He'd presumed he was alone, and he frowned into the shadows and located a woman sitting on a bench under an arbor. Her hair was a white-blond color that was almost silver in the moonlight. She seemed to shimmer, so she could have been a fairy and not a real person.

He sauntered over and was rather astounded to discover that she was smoking a cheroot. It was a shocking sight and considered a scandalous vice for a lady.

She was holding what appeared to be a glass of liquor too—smoking *and* drinking!—and she toasted him with it, then downed the contents.

"Is that brandy?" he asked.

"Whiskey."

"Have you any left? Will you offer me some?"

"I have plenty." She reached down and produced a decanter. "I only have the one glass though, so you'll have to use it. I can't imagine you'd like to swig directly out of the decanter. Or would you?"

"I'm probably not that debauched. Not yet anyway."

She poured another helping and handed it to him. He took it from her and seated himself next to her on the bench. He had a perfect view of the manor. The windows were open, and they could see guests dancing, eating, and playing cards. They watched the activities, neither of them inclined to speak, and it was a companionable silence.

After a bit, he shifted toward her. "I'm Warwick Stone." She didn't furnish her

own name, so he said, "And you are . . . ?"

"Miss Dobbs. Wilhelmina Dobbs."

"Why are you lurking out in the dark? Are you a servant who's run away from her chores? Are you a chaperone who's hiding from your obnoxious charge? Are you a besotted maiden who's spying on a swain?"

"I'm none of those." She smirked, but again, she didn't add more.

"You have to clarify. You can't keep me in suspense."

"I'm just . . . Wilhelmina."

She was twenty-five or so, lithe, slender, and very beautiful. She had a heart-shaped face, big, sparkling eyes, and all that lush white hair. It was haphazardly pinned in a messy chignon that was very alluring, and he couldn't stop staring at her.

"Wilhelmina is too much name for you," he said. "You need something shorter. Does anyone ever call you Willie?"

"My father used to, but I'm plain, ordinary Wilhelmina to everyone else."

"You're smoking and drinking, by yourself in this secluded garden, so you're incredibly odd. I must declare that you are not plain or ordinary."

"I'm not really smoking."

"You're pretending?"

"I like the smell. It reminds me of my father, so every once in a while, I light a cheroot and think of him."

"He's deceased?"

"Yes, seven years ago now, but I still fondly remember him."

She sighed as if the man had died the previous day.

"And what about the liquor?" he asked. "Are you sniffing it and thinking of him too?"

"No. I'm drinking the liquor."

"You have bad habits."

"Too many to count, I'm afraid."

He snorted with amusement. "How am I to assess such candor?"

She studied him, and he suspected she'd answer, but she said, "Why are you at Hill Haven? I assume you're here for the hunting."

"Yes, and for the socializing. Mrs. Milton invited my father, but he was too lazy to travel, so he passed the invitation along to me."

"From the comment I heard you utter, it's obvious you weren't eager to come."

He shrugged. "It won't kill me."

She sputtered out a laugh. “Blanche knows how to throw a party, so I predict you’ll enjoy yourself.”

“So far, I have to agree. I’ve been courteously entertained.”

He wanted to inquire as to why she hadn’t been included in the group of guests, but she wasn’t about to explain herself, so he didn’t press. He certainly found her to be much more intriguing than anybody he’d met since he’d arrived.

“Are you from London?” she asked.

“Yes, although I grew up in the country at my father’s estate. I’m more partial to the city and the many diversions available there.”

“You don’t rush home constantly to a quiet, rural haven?”

“Gad, no. I don’t even keep a house in the country. If I must visit a rustic locale, it’s my father’s manor. Then I immediately recollect why I reside in town.”

“You’re not sentimental about the spot?”

“No. In my very vivid memories of my childhood there, I was a virtual terror who embraced every sort of dangerous mischief. I’m always surprised I survived my boyhood.”

“I can completely see how you might have been wild.”

“I had a horrid upbringing, where I was allowed to develop many despicable traits that have never faded. I’m possessed of many vices too, and I love to revel in them, which means I live in the city.”

“Are you a cad? Do you chase loose women and repeatedly disgrace yourself with tarts?”

“Absolutely. Loose women are the only kind that interest me.”

He’d made her chuckle. “Do you also gamble your money away and stagger about on the edge of ruin?”

“I gamble for fun, but I could never squander my fortune. I’m obscenely rich.”

“Don’t brag,” she scolded. “It’s annoying.”

“Who’s bragging? I’m simply stating the facts.”

“You’re so vain. I’m amazed your head can fit through a door.”

“I’m not humble; I admit it. It’s not possible for me to speak or act like a modest person.”

She took the glass from him and downed a swallow of the whiskey. It was extremely intimate to be sharing the same glass, so they seemed much closer than they were. He shifted even nearer, so their arms and thighs were crushed together all the way down. He was delighted to note she was no shrinking violet and didn’t move to

put some space between them.

"Tell me about yourself," he said. "What is your position at Hill Haven?"

"I'm a Milton cousin. A very distant cousin."

"To Mrs. Milton?"

"No, to her late husband, Harold. He and my father were related, and Harold was one of his most devoted patrons. Blanche opened a cottage for us a few years ago, so we'd have somewhere more permanent to stay. We travelled extensively when I was a girl, and it's been a blessing to settle here."

"Who was your father? Your tone suggests I should know who he was."

"Jefferson Dobbs?"

Warwick blanched. "Jefferson Dobbs . . . the famous artist?"

"The very one."

"My goodness. I generally consider myself to be an undereducated dolt, but even *I* have heard of him."

She smiled. "He had an ego as big as yours, so he'd have enjoyed learning that you recognize his name."

Jefferson Dobbs had been a brilliant fellow who'd dazzled critics, aristocrats, and commoners alike. He'd painted portraits that hung in palaces and museums across Europe. He'd been a libertine too, and scandal had followed him wherever he went.

How had he died? Warwick couldn't recall, but no doubt, it had been in a shameful fashion. He'd been too much of a notorious character to have passed away in his sleep from old age.

"Are you a lady of leisure?" he asked. "I have no idea what sort of income a man like your father would earn. Did he leave you wealthy and indolent?"

It was a rude query, but she didn't mind. "Father made a ton of money, especially in his later years, but it flowed through his fingers like water, so no, I'm not wealthy or indolent."

"Why didn't you come to Mrs. Milton's party?"

She wrinkled her nose. "I'm not much of a one for parties, and I paint too, so I was busy."

"You . . . *paint*. In a serious way?"

"I'm Jefferson Dobbs' daughter. Is there any other way to paint but seriously?"

"I've always been told it has to be a hobby for your gender."

She clucked her tongue with exasperation. "You would spew a foolish remark like that."

“Of course I would. I’m renowned for being very foolish. Are you as gifted as your father?”

“I’m better than he was.”

“Ah . . . you’re so humble,” he facetiously said. “We have that in common.”

She chuckled again. “I don’t have many traits that are suitable in a female. I smoke and drink. I wear inappropriate attire. I paint. I curse occasionally too, when I make a mistake or when I’m aggravated.”

“Do you have a temper?”

“A ghastly one.”

“Please don’t ever unleash it in my direction.”

“If you can promise to never irritate me, I’m sure I’ll be able to control myself.”

He pointed to the manor. “Tell me the truth about why you didn’t come to the party. You claimed you were busy, but it’s almost midnight, so I don’t believe your excuse. What’s wrong? Weren’t you invited?”

“I’m usually invited, but I really was working. I often work until dawn—if the mood strikes me—so I couldn’t pause to change my clothes.”

“Well, *I* am at Hill Haven now. Could my fabulous presence lure you over?”

“No, sorry, and I must confess that I didn’t care who was attending. I figured there would be illustrious personages such as your grand self. You’re the only type Blanche likes.”

“I am very illustrious. I can’t deny it.”

“Your pomposity is showing.”

“It practically oozes out of me. I can’t hold it in.”

The moon had been briefly hidden by a cloud, but the cloud moved away, bathing them in silver light. She seemed to shimmer again, as if she were an apparition.

“What color are your eyes?” he asked.

“Why would you need to know that?”

“I’m just curious.”

“They’re blue, but they can look violet if I have on a lavender gown. I exactly resemble my dear, departed father, so my features are thoroughly exotic.”

“They certainly are.” He studied her even more meticulously, wishing they were inside so he could get a clearer picture. There was no doubt she was stunning.

“I’m staying for a whole week,” he told her.

“Is that a comment or a warning? Should I be alarmed?”

“I might become a bother.”

“That news does not surprise me.”

“There will be suppers and dancing every evening while I’m here. Will you come over for some of it? I’ve decided we have to dance.”

“Are you a dancer?” she inquired.

“I am—if the woman who asks me is pretty enough to capture my fancy.”

“Isn’t the man supposed to ask?”

“You’re the kind of female who might shatter that convention.”

They snuggled even closer, as if their bodies were attuned and being naturally pulled together. It was an odd and electrifying sensation, and he’d never felt anything like it.

“You haven’t answered me,” he said. “Will you join in some of the soirees?”

“I might let you coax me into it.”

Their conversation dwindled, and they sat like two halfwits, grinning and gaping. Sparks were flying, as well as a perception of fond acquaintance, as if he’d known her for years.

“Have we met before?” he asked.

“No. I’d definitely remember you.”

“You seem so familiar to me. Perhaps we were destined to cross paths.”

“Perhaps,” she agreed.

“But if the universe arranged our meeting, what could the purpose be? I hope it doesn’t wind up being for a horrid reason.”

“I shall hope not too.” She nodded to the house. “Shouldn’t you go in? Won’t all the young ladies be languishing without you there to entertain them?”

“I’m having much more fun out here with you.”

“That’s not much of an endorsement of Blanche’s guestlist. It’s the first night of the party, and you’re already hiding in the garden.”

“I will admit—only to you and only this once—that it is a group of silly girls.”

“We’re tucked away in the country, so there aren’t very many interesting girls left. They ran off to town the minute they could escape. If you were yearning for stellar company, you should have remained in London.”

“I’m not totally bored. Yet. *You* have raised my expectations as to what sort of holiday I will have.”

"I'm glad I could be of service." She swallowed the last of the whiskey, then said, "You are in no hurry to return to the manor, but I should get back to work."

Like a dunce, he asked, "What could occupy you so late?"

"I paint, Mr. Stone. Pay attention, and don't utter another idiotic insult about it being a hobby."

"From the caustic gleam in your eye, I wouldn't dare."

"Thank you." She gestured with the glass. "Shall I leave it and the decanter? Will you tarry by yourself in the dark and drink until you're foxed?"

"No, you can take them with you, but must you depart?"

"Yes, I must. I told you: I'm working. You don't believe me, but I am."

"Your boss must be an ogre."

"She is."

They smiled, and it was the damndest thing, but he nearly dipped in and kissed her. It would have been thoroughly appropriate. The impression of lengthy friendship was growing by the second, and he felt as if he'd kissed her a hundred times in the past.

Before he could behave rashly, she shifted away and stood. He shamelessly reached out and clasped hold of her hand.

"Stay a bit longer." He sounded as if he was begging.

"I can't, and you were correct when you claimed you could become a bother."

"Maybe I *should* bother you. According to your description, you're the dreaded poor relative, and your life is so dull that you're painting in the middle of the night. Your staid existence should be enlivened."

"If I should ever require enlivening, I'll be sure to apprise you."

She smirked, then picked up decanter and glass and sauntered off into the shadows. He sat, frozen on the bench, gripping the slats so he didn't leap up and chase after her. He was that intrigued.

Her footsteps faded, then a door opened and shut. He glanced over his shoulder, and there was a cottage behind him, the chimney visible in the trees. So . . . she was close by. He liked knowing that.

He dawdled for an eternity, pondering the strange encounter. He tried to picture her in her studio. Did she have a studio? She insisted she was a serious artist so she must have one.

When he caught himself replaying every word they'd spoken, he was startled into realizing he couldn't wait to see her again. He'd assumed the party would be a

tedious slog, but now that he'd met Miss Dobbs, perhaps it wouldn't be quite so dreary. In fact, it might turn out to be enormously thrilling.

He rose and walked to the house. But he took his time, not being in any rush to arrive. After chatting with Miss Dobbs, there was no one inside who tantalized him at all.

Chapter Three



“WE’RE WALKING TO THE village. Will you come with us?”

“I’m too busy.”

“You’re always busy.”

“And you’re never busy.”

Wilhelmina glared at Edna Stewart, shooting a look of exasperation that Edna didn’t require much energy to decipher. Edna was a complainer, and she especially liked to complain about Wilhelmina who, in her view, never behaved correctly and never made the appropriate choice.

At forty, Edna was petite and slender, with brown hair that was showing streaks of grey and blue eyes that were growing grey too. She was Wilhelmina’s half-aunt, sired by Wilhelmina’s grandfather on a housemaid. Was there such a thing as a *half* aunt? She and Wilhelmina’s mother had been reared together, but Edna had been her servant, which never ceased to gall her.

Wilhelmina’s mother had died when Wilhelmina was a baby. She’d married Jefferson Dobbs when she was sixteen and he’d been thirty-two, and he’d driven her to an early grave. According to Edna, it had been a great mismatch, with Jefferson being a sophisticated libertine, and Wilhelmina’s pretty, foolish mother entering into the relationship with completely unrealistic expectations.

In the beginning, Jefferson had been a penniless artist who’d tantalized her with dreams of his approaching fame and fortune. She’d passed away before his wealth and celebrity had accrued, so she hadn’t lived to see the better days he’d promised when she’d wed him.

After she’d perished, Edna had remained with them and had raised Wilhelmina—well, as much as anyone could have *raised* her. She’d always been too independent. Edna had tended Jefferson too, but he’d been so spoiled that it had been

like caring for a toddler.

She'd wasted her life trailing after him, cleaning up his messes, and fixing what he'd broken. He'd been an expert at breaking things, but she and Wilhelmina had loved him to distraction. He'd been a flamboyant, mad genius who'd killed himself at age fifty by staggering around in the dark—in a drunken stupor—where he'd managed to fall off a cliff and crack his head open.

He'd been so extraordinary, and his ending so mundane, that they were still grappling with it. They missed him desperately, but pretended they didn't. Edna usually claimed she'd hated him and harbored no fond memories. For Wilhelmina, he'd been the center of her world, and it would never be the same without him in the middle of it.

They were in Wilhelmina's studio, with Wilhelmina standing in front of her latest canvas. Edna was huddled in the doorway and refusing to enter—as if there was a disease inside that might be catching.

The space had once been Jefferson's studio. It had started out as a shed behind the cottage Blanche had provided to them. Blanche had adored Jefferson, and he'd coaxed her into remodeling it for him. She was a patron of the arts, so it had given her the chance to brag that Jefferson Dobbs was residing on her property and that she was supporting his endeavors.

There were huge windows across one wall so plenty of light filtered in. The floors had been reboarded, shelves and cabinets built. It was an artist's haven, and Wilhelmina spent nearly all of her time in it. There was even a small room attached with a cot and dresser, so she could nap, then jump back into any project consuming her.

Her father had added the room for when a creative urge swept over him and he worked all night. Or for when he'd been too foxed to make it to his bed in the cottage.

She often slept there, which Edna deemed to be unseemly. It allowed Wilhelmina to avoid many of her duties, so Edna wound up running the household, and it was a constant bone of contention between them. But Wilhelmina had no feminine proclivities and topics like *home* and *hearth* didn't interest her.

Edna understood Wilhelmina's lack of female attributes, but the realization antagonized her. Edna was very conservative, very traditional, and while she'd been happy to tolerate Jefferson's whims and extravagances, he'd been a man. She didn't feel a woman should act as a man would, and she never let Wilhelmina forget it.

Footsteps sounded behind Edna, and Charlie peeked around her skirt. He'd just turned six, a thin waif of a boy who was possessed of Wilhelmina's same Dobbs white-blond hair and striking blue eyes.

He was a bundle of energy and trouble who vexed Edna and kept her angry and overwhelmed. Wilhelmina furnished very little parenting to him, so it was a relentless source of tension. Wilhelmina didn't have any maternal propensities, so Charlie was another burden the Dobbs family had foisted on Edna.

Yet Edna didn't have to shoulder the obligations she'd assumed. She'd willingly accepted them, and she could have left, but where would she have gone? Her main goal was to live somewhere safe and permanent, and Wilhelmina—by being Harold Milton's cousin—had supplied it to her.

Wilhelmina thought Edna should be more grateful. She never was though.

"We're walking to the village!" Charlie said, as Edna had told her. "Will you come?"

"I can't."

He skipped in, halting at Wilhelmina's easel. She'd been trying to apply the correct shade of crimson to a flower petal.

He pointed to it. "You need more red right there."

"I know that, you rascal."

He was already exhibiting her passion and talent for art, and she had no doubt he'd carry on the tradition.

"May I paint once we're back?" he asked.

"If Edna decides you can." Wilhelmina peered over at a scowling Edna, then reached in her pocket and pulled out a penny. "Buy a candy."

"I will!" he merrily said, and he grabbed it and raced out.

He clasped Edna's hand as he ran by, so she was forced to lurch after him. They vanished down the path and were swallowed up by the hedges. Then Wilhelmina went over to a chair to relax for a bit. The air had to settle before she could focus again.

Edna always brought negative energy into any room, and Charlie always brought positive energy and joy. Their two auras hovered like a dueling cloud, and Wilhelmina had to wait until it was quiet so she could restart what she'd been doing.

She'd picked up her brush and was standing at the easel, when the hair on her neck prickled. She glanced over to find Warwick Stone leaned in the doorway. She inhaled a sharp breath, struggling for that to be her sole reaction to his sudden

appearance.

Since she'd chatted with him the prior evening, she hadn't stopped thinking about him. He'd accused her of having a boring life, and though she'd denied it was dreary, it absolutely was, and she worked to keep it that way. When her father had still been alive, she'd moved across Europe with him as he'd painted and had left chaos in his wake. She'd had enough drama and excitement to last a dozen centuries.

She'd latched onto her spot at Hill Haven and wouldn't do anything that might cause her to lose it. She hid herself away and didn't socialize. She definitely never flirted with charming bachelors. Blanche threw regular parties, but Wilhelmina rarely attended. There were too many issues with Blanche and Cassandra, and it was easier if Wilhelmina stayed away. She never interacted with their guests, never befriended any of them.

Blanche was searching for a husband for Cassandra, but the whole notion of her marrying was too much for Wilhelmina. She couldn't bear to watch it unfold. Was Warwick Stone a candidate to be Cassandra's husband? He had to be, and the entire situation was exasperating.

He was more handsome in the daylight than he'd been the previous night—if that was possible. His eyes were an arresting blue, and with his golden-blond hair, broad shoulders, and very long legs, he was virile and masculine, like a Greek god who might have been depicted on a church ceiling.

He was tall, six feet at least, and with her being five-foot-five in her slippers, he would tower over her. If she'd liked men—which she generally didn't—she'd have been delighted by his arrival. But she'd had a front-row seat at witnessing how horrid the males of the species could be, and they never displayed any traits that appealed to her.

"Miss Dobbs!" he said. "We meet again."

"Did I mention that you could become a bother?"

"Am I bothering you already?"

"I can't decide yet. Let's see how quickly you grow to be a nuisance."

He huffed with feigned offense. "I've never once been a nuisance."

"You liar. I'm sure that's only one of your bad qualities."

He strutted in as if he owned the place, and she liked his swagger and confidence—in spite of herself. He kept coming until they were toe to toe. They were grinning, pleased with themselves and the sparks that ignited when they were together. Wilhelmina would hardly consider herself an expert on romantic relationships, but she

knew enough to recognize that their attraction was odd and unusual.

“Gad, your eyes are violet, aren’t they?” he said. “You told me they were, but I didn’t believe you.”

“They’re blue, but in certain light, they can look violet.”

“You, Miss Dobbs, are stunning.”

He dipped in and, before she realized his intent, he kissed her. It was shocking and totally unexpected, but at the same juncture, it seemed totally expected and completely appropriate for him to have proceeded.

There was nothing particularly ardent about it, but still, she quailed with alarm, like a frightened virgin. Her response was so embarrassing. It wasn’t as if she hadn’t been kissed in the past. She couldn’t have traipsed after her father through the palaces of Europe without randy oafs taking advantage. Some of her father’s wastrel friends had misbehaved with her too, so she wasn’t a novice at amour.

She was twenty-five, a confirmed spinster, who understood what men wanted from women. She *liked* kissing, but it had been a very long time since any fellow had dared. With a palm on his chest, she eased him back a step. He chuckled, as if he’d been administering a test and she’d failed it.

“I’ve been anxious to do that since we were in the garden last night,” he said.

The admission was thrilling, but she was compelled to reply, “You have not.”

“You can’t claim to be dismayed. If you tell me you’re a squeamish Miss, I’ll call you an annoying tease.”

“I am squeamish and I’m not.”

“Your answer makes no sense.”

Before she could stop him, he stole another kiss, and she slid out of his arms.

“Could we . . . ah . . . slow down for a minute?” she asked.

“I can’t slow down. If I see something I crave, I reach out and grab it.”

“You talk as if I’m a horse at an auction you’re dying to purchase.”

“I am *dying* to have you. You’re correct about that.”

It was a risqué comment that should have insulted her, but she wasn’t insulted. As she’d learned years earlier, she possessed her father’s partiality for immoral temptation. Mr. Stone could lure it to the fore with very little cajoling.

He whipped away from her and strolled about the studio, and he was an adept snoop who had no shame. He opened drawers, sniffed paints, and flicked at brush bristles with his thumb.

The moment was awkward for her. She seldom had visitors, and she might

have been in the middle of an artistic competition and about to be judged. To her enormous disgust, she yearned for him to declare her brilliant. The wave of apprehension being produced was silly, and his opinion about any topic was irrelevant, so why let it matter?

The problem was that she was very lonely and chafing over her small life in the country. Growing up in her father's shadow, she'd suffered too much chaos. When Jefferson had brought them to Hill Haven, when Blanche had promised they could stay, it had been a precious gift, but the reality was stifling.

She'd been raised in a big world, a world of money, fame, power, and rank. Hill Haven was a tiny blot in rural England, and she was consumed by her father's wanderlust and greedy hunger for more than she'd been given.

Warwick Stone was rich, handsome, and charming, and he was fascinated by her. The notion was terribly intriguing, and it stirred her worst impulses.

She had dozens of finished works that were unframed and stacked along the walls, and she had five canvases on easels, all in various stages of completion, as she waited for the paint to dry. He sifted through the finished paintings, then studied the ones on the easels.

His focus was calculating, as if he were a fussy critic about to render an assessment that would devastate her. Then he murmured, almost to himself, "These are amazing."

He flashed a luscious smile that rattled her, and she preened like a besotted schoolgirl.

"I told you I was incredible," she said. "Didn't you believe me?"

"Of course not. You're a female, which means you couldn't possibly have been as talented as you claimed. The great artists are all men, so I was certain you were bragging."

"Ooh, you're such an exasperating dolt. I've only been acquainted with you for a few hours. Have I mentioned yet that I hate men?"

"No, you don't."

"Yes, I do. I really, really do, and if you intend to merely strut about and spew ludicrous remarks, I wish you'd leave."

"You'd miss me too much."

He ambled over to her, looking wretchedly wonderful, and her pulse fluttered like a debutante's.

"I was teasing you about men being superior." He bent down and nuzzled her

nape. "I can be very pompous."

"I agree."

"In my own defense, I was reared like an abandoned wolf pup. I have no social graces."

"Is that some sort of apology?"

"Yes. Is it accepted?"

"I'll think about it."

"Think hard, would you? Because you're extraordinary, and I am delighted to have figured it out."

"You're just saying that to make me like you."

"I don't have to *make* you like me. You will become thoroughly ensnared with scarcely any effort on my part."

He kissed her yet again, and this time, she didn't skitter away like a naïve ninny. She didn't beg him to desist. She simply pulled him closer and kissed him back. She was standing next to her work table, and he crushed her to it, so she could feel every inch of his torso. His phallus was solid as stone and pushing into her abdomen.

She was a spinster, but she wasn't an innocent girl. She knew details about physical relations that no young lady ought to know, so she wasn't confused about what it indicated: He desired her in a manly fashion, and the discovery was exhilarating.

They kept on for an eternity, and luckily, he didn't exceed too many bounds. He didn't unbutton any buttons or untie any laces, although he did take down her hair. It had been haphazardly balanced, with her rolling it into a messy chignon, then her shoving a paintbrush handle into it to hold it in place.

He yanked it out, and the soft strands fell around her shoulders, so he could riffle his fingers through them. It was a perfect moment, one she'd have liked to continue forever, but all good things ended. She'd learned that in too many painful ways.

Eventually, he drew his mouth from hers, but he didn't release her. He cradled her in his arms, and she told herself to be glad nothing more shocking had occurred. She was Jefferson Dobbs' daughter, and she valiantly struggled to tamp down the debauched traits she'd inherited from him.

If Mr. Stone hadn't broken off their kiss, if he'd spurred the episode to a more scandalous level, would she have participated?

She liked to assume she wouldn't have, but she'd never met a man like him.

She'd had few chances to prove to herself that she could behave morally when moral behavior was required, so it was highly likely he could have coaxed her into dissolution.

"There is a supper tonight," he said. "Will you come?"

She'd rather go to the barber and have a tooth extracted than fraternize with Blanche and Cassandra. "Probably not. I have to work."

"No, you're dining at the manor. I insist. Besides, you promised to dance with me."

"Did I promise?"

"Yes, and I demand you oblige me."

"Are you a bully, Mr. Stone?"

"Not usually, but you bring out the worst in me."

"What if I don't want to eat with Blanche's guests?"

"Then you and I shall loiter in a corner and make fun of everyone else."

She chuckled. "It's dawned on me that I like you quite a bit more than I should."

"And I like you more than I should too."

"What's happening here?" she asked. "I'm not the kind of female who kisses a man when he's a complete stranger."

"I should hope not, and just for the record, I'm not the sort who kisses strange women either."

"You're such a liar. I'm sure you kiss strange women all the time."

"Well, I have been known to act brazenly, but it's been a while. You simply tantalize me in a manner I can't fight or ignore."

"I feel the same," she said.

"Come to supper. Dance with me. Dazzle me with your beauty and poise, so I will be entertained the whole evening."

"I'll consider it."

"It's pointless to consider, so don't try. If you don't obey me, I'll never stop nagging."

"I'm certain that's true."

He stepped away, their bodies separating, and the loss of him was like a jolt to her equilibrium, like the prick of a knife to her heart. It was a peculiar realization, and it made no sense, but there it was.

"I have to get back to the manor," he said. "I'm supposed to play cards, so

people will be searching for me.”

“Will you play for money?”

“Only for pennies.”

“Don’t cheat.”

He tsked with fake outrage. “Do I look like a fellow who would cheat at cards?”

“You look like a fellow who might cheat at anything. Not just cards.”

“You are a witch to say so, and you seem to have cast some dastardly magic on me that I can’t deflect.”

“If I have, I’ll never admit it.”

He yanked away, then headed out, tossing over his shoulder, “You better show up for supper or I’ll traipse over here and drag you to the dining room.”

“I’ll let it be a surprise whether I’ll be there or not. I like to be mysterious, so you shouldn’t ever count on me.”

He snorted at that and kept on. He’d exited the studio and had started down the path, when suddenly, he whirled around and dashed back. He leaned in the door and said, “I miss you already. What is wrong with me?”

“I have no idea what’s plaguing you.”

“Your answer doesn’t comfort me at all.”

He jerked away and continued on, and she froze, wondering if he’d pop in again, but he didn’t. She was quite undone herself, so it was a benefit to have him depart. She needed an interval to reflect on what was transpiring.

He was a practiced roué, so it was very likely—on his end—he wasn’t sincere. He didn’t *miss* her. He would be uttering delicious comments merely to wear her down so she’d attempt antics with him that she shouldn’t.

She knew that. She understood that, but she didn’t care if Mr. Stone was being unscrupulous. She simply didn’t care.

He would be at Hill Haven for a week. What could happen in a week? Not much, she was convinced of it, so she would enjoy herself for once.

By flirting with him, perhaps she could slake some of the claustrophobia that often overwhelmed her. She vividly remembered the bigger world where she’d reveled so grandly with her famous father. She dreamed of it. She obsessed over the smallest details until, most days, she felt as if she was trapped and choking to death.

Mr. Stone could ease some of that tension. He could stir her mood and lift her spirits, so she could breathe for a change. And whatever ultimately occurred between

them, when he left, she wouldn't be sorry.

Chapter Four



“WHAT DO YOU THINK of him?”

“I guess he’d be fine.”

Blanche Milton glared at her only child, Cassandra, and snorted with disgust. They were at the rear of the manor, in Blanche’s office, and discussing Warwick Stone. She was seated at her desk, and Cassandra was in the chair across.

Out the window, she saw Mr. Stone walking in the garden. He was alone, and she couldn’t imagine where he’d been, but Wilhelmina’s cottage was behind him, as if he might have been visiting her.

Irritation bubbled up. Blanche never liked Cassandra’s suitors to meet Wilhelmina. Cassandra was pretty, but Wilhelmina was beautiful. Cassandra had a sunny disposition, but Wilhelmina was exotic and enigmatic. She exuded an air of indifference that made men eager to tame her. It wasn’t anything she did specifically. She simply radiated a disdain and languor that men found tempting.

Add in the fact that she was Jefferson Dobbs’ daughter, and she was an irresistible enticement. Blanche didn’t want Warwick Stone within a hundred yards of her, and Wilhelmina had better sense than to have formed an acquaintance with him.

She knew how Blanche expected her to behave, and her continued residence at Hill Haven depended on her following Blanche’s rules, but she was as pompous and obstinate as her father had been. She didn’t believe she should have to answer to anyone, and it would be just like her to deliberately befriend Warwick Stone, to turn him away from Cassandra, which could never be allowed.

His father, Neville, would be content to have Cassandra as his daughter-in-law. Cassandra was from the right class and from the right family, but Wilhelmina was merely the common offspring of a mad genius. She would never be suitable for any purpose.

Blanche’s late husband, Harold, had been Neville’s great chum when they were

young and stupid. On occasion, Blanche had been an intimate companion of Neville's too, and a match between their children would be a perfect ending.

The problem was that Neville's sons were just as notorious as he was. They assumed they could remain bachelors forever, and they weren't keen on the notion of being leg-shackled. Neville had instructed her not to mention matrimony in front of Warwick, so Blanche had to oblige him.

It wasn't easy though. Warwick was aware of why he'd been invited to Hill Haven, and it was exhausting to pretend there were no schemes fomenting.

"Mr. Stone is handsome," Cassandra said.

"The men of the Stone family are renowned for their good looks."

"And he's rich. You swore he was, and from his jewelry and the cut of his clothes, he seems to be."

"They're all rich. Obscenely handsome and obscenely rich."

"Do you suppose he's generous?"

"Probably, but no wife can be sure of any detail."

It was becoming more and more obvious that Blanche had placed too many hopes on finding a stellar husband for Cassandra. For years, she'd searched the available candidates, but they'd all disappointed her for one reason or another, and Blanche was very picky.

In the past, she might not have considered Warwick for Cassandra. He was a disreputable scoundrel, but with Neville inheriting the Swindon title, Warwick's status had risen immeasurably.

"I like Holden Drake more than Mr. Stone," Cassandra said. "He's a viscount who will definitely be an earl in the future. There's no question about it. Warwick is a second son, so with him, there's no guarantee."

"No one can predict a conclusion, and Mr. Stone's cousins were unlucky. A minor mishap with his brother, Hunter, would push Warwick into the correct line."

"Why don't we set our sights on Lord Drake? I can't fathom why you haven't tried for him. Since he's here at our party, we should work to intrigue him."

Blanche never liked to admit defeat, so she didn't confess that she'd contacted Lord Drake's father about Cassandra. The man hadn't been interested, and he'd been rude about it too.

Instead, she said, "Lord Drake is bound to wed his cousin. He always has been, and I'm surprised the betrothal hasn't already been announced. We have to keep our attention on Mr. Stone."

“I will flirt with Lord Drake though. I’m positive he’d like it. He’s been sending those sorts of signals.”

Blanche glowered ferociously. “You will not flirt with Lord Drake!”

“Oh, Mother, you can be so dreary. Don’t scold me as if I’m still sixteen. I know how to act, and I don’t need a nanny.”

“You know how to *act*? That is the most preposterous statement you’ve ever uttered in my presence.”

“Let’s not quarrel about ancient history,” Cassandra said. “Can’t you get over it? I certainly have.”

Blanche took a deep breath and tamped down the vicious comments that were begging to spill out. She was forty-four, a short, portly female who looked much older than she actually was. Her hair and eyes had turned grey—due to the stress of so many dreams being dashed. Cassandra could goad her until her pulse raced at such a high speed that Blanche often felt as if she was suffocating.

If she’d had other children to rely on, she and Cassandra probably wouldn’t even be speaking. There had been a period in their relationship where Blanche had wondered if she might disown the wretched girl. But Harold had perished, leaving her a widow. They had few relatives worth noting, and Blanche wasn’t adept at handling money on her own, so it vanished down inexplicable holes. Each year, she had . . . *less* of everything.

It would have been nice to have a son who would have provided more security and prosperity. She’d suffered for decades, flat on her back, as Harold had sawed away between her thighs in their failed attempts to have a bigger family. Blanche had even tried to remedy the dilemma by having brief affairs with cads like Neville, but none of it had worked. She’d just had Cassandra, and if she cut the girl loose, she wouldn’t have anyone.

She changed the subject. “Have you managed to socialize with Mr. Stone?”

“No. He’s always with Lord Drake and Mrs. Smithwaite. The three of them are glued together at the hip. I’ve been left with the distinct impression that they don’t like me.”

“You have to lure him away from them so he focuses on you. He’s not eager to wed, so we have to convince him that it’s a good idea.”

“I don’t understand why you’re so sure he’s right for me. Not when he’s so aloof and unfriendly. He ought to be flattered that we’re considering him.”

“You’re deranged enough to assume that’s true.”

“I’m serious. If he isn’t dying to have me, why should we bother?”

Blanche wasn’t about to confirm that she was worried about Cassandra’s marital chances. She was twenty-three already, and men liked young brides so they could mold and train them before they were set in their ways. Cassandra was hard-headed and arrogant, and no husband wanted a stubborn wife. She would require a spouse who could tolerate her personality quirks, but how was Blanche to guess if a fellow was the best choice?

“I saw Mr. Stone in the garden,” she said. “Why don’t you throw yourself in his path? Perhaps you can chat for a bit—without Lord Drake or Mrs. Smithwaite interrupting.”

“I’d rather chat with Lord Drake,” Cassandra snottily replied.

Blanche bristled with aggravation. “Don’t try my patience. Hurry out to the front foyer and *accidentally* bump into him. Be charming for once.”

“Why is the burden on me? Shouldn’t he have to exert himself too? Why must I make all the effort?”

“Just go, Cassandra! Please.”

Her daughter stood and flounced out, and Blanche eased back in her chair. She couldn’t figure out why she wasted any energy on Cassandra, but then, if Blanche didn’t find her a husband, what would happen to her?

Blanche had to lower her standards and pick somebody. Fast.

Warwick Stone would be a fine option, and if she couldn’t push matters along on the normal route, she was willing to take drastic action. If need be, the arrangement of a compromising situation was not out of the question.

Why shouldn’t she contemplate it? This was love. This was war. Wasn’t every ruse allowed?



“THERE YOU ARE!” CASSANDRA gushed to Mr. Stone. “Mother noticed you were alone, and she was afraid we were being negligent hosts.”

“It’s a beautiful afternoon. I thought I should enjoy some fresh air before I lock myself in the manor for the rest of the day.”

“So you don’t think we’re ignoring you?”

“Definitely not.”

“Good. Mother was having a fit of the vapors over it.”

Cassandra clasped his arm and snuggled herself closer than was proper, her skirt swirling around his legs. They were headed toward the verandah and the stairs that would convey them inside. There was a very short distance remaining, but she was adept at getting what she wanted. She took small steps so he had to match her strides.

“Tell me about yourself, Mr. Stone,” she said. “We’ve had such limited time to become acquainted.”

“There’s not much to tell,” he claimed. “I live in London. I’m a bachelor. I lead a bachelor’s life.”

“Do you have a house in the country? I seem to remember Mother saying you don’t.”

“I never liked the country very much. I spent my boyhood at my father’s estate of Stone Manor, and it was terribly dreary.”

She nearly blurted out that she had property as part of her dowry, that it would go to her husband, but she swallowed down that news. She wasn’t to speak a single word that might make him suppose she had matrimony on her mind. The poor oaf might faint from shock.

The notion that he resided in town was thrilling. It meant, if he broke down and proposed, she’d finally reside in London too. She was stuck at Hill Haven, and even though her mother owned a home in town, she almost always refused to open it, and Cassandra couldn’t bear her circumstances.

It was awful to interact, year after year, with the same boring neighbors. Anyone who was the least bit entertaining had fled to London and stayed there, and she intended to join them. If she couldn’t have a spouse who would let her do that, then what was the point of marrying?

Wilhelmina had travelled everywhere with Jefferson. She’d visited many of the most celebrated palaces on the Continent, and Cassandra was so jealous about it. Why shouldn’t she be permitted the same sort of bigger existence?

“I met a woman in the garden,” he said. “Miss Dobbs? Isn’t she your cousin?”

“Yes, dear Wilhelmina. She’s been like a sister to me.”

“She’s . . . interesting.”

“That’s a very polite description.” She chuckled to lighten her next comment. “Most people deem her to be very odd.”

“I have to agree that she’s different.”

Cassandra peeked at him, and from his blank expression, she couldn’t decide if

he'd been charmed by Wilhelmina or if he'd been horrified. In case he'd been fascinated, Cassandra couldn't have any curiosity flaring.

She frowned, hoping she appeared sufficiently remorseful, and she leaned in and murmured, "May I share a secret about her?"

He stiffened. "Yes, of course."

"You'd have to promise you won't gossip about her with your friends."

"I never would. I promise."

She leaned even closer and said, "She's a fallen woman."

He gasped with dismay. "She's ruined?"

"Yes. It was six or seven years ago now. There was a child."

"Oh, my. I'm sorry I pried."

Cassandra waved her hand, as if she could whisk the depressing story away. "We never talk about what occurred, and Mother has been a veritable saint in helping her through the scandal. We were so fond of her famous father; we couldn't abandon her. For his sake."

"Who seduced her? Was it a local beau?"

"There's the rub. She would never reveal his identity, so we don't know."

"That's strange. You'd think she'd have announced the culprit in order to force a marriage and legitimize the child."

"Well, Wilhelmina isn't like anybody else, is she? You noticed that right off."

"What happened to the baby? Was it adopted out?"

"No. It was a boy. Charlie. You'll see him around the estate. He looks just like her; you can't miss him."

From up on the verandah, Mrs. Smithwaite called to them. "Mr. Stone! Lord Drake is pacing, waiting for you to return. The cards have been dealt, and he's anxious to win all your money."

Mr. Stone laughed. "He doesn't have any money to bet, so that's not much of a threat." He glanced at Cassandra. "Will you come in too? Would you like to play with us?"

"Mother doesn't like me to wager—even if it's for pennies." When Cassandra gambled, she grew too animated, so Blanche made her avoid it at all costs. Once she was a wife in town, it was a hobby she would fully enjoy. "I like to watch others having fun though, so I'll definitely join you."

They started up the stairs, and she whispered, "Remember! Not a word about Wilhelmina."

“I would never spread rumors,” he insisted.

They reached Mrs. Smithwaite, and they walked inside together, so any opportunity for further conversation was lost.

Cassandra followed them to a parlor where several tables had been arranged. She took a chair that was positioned between Mr. Stone and Lord Drake. If they peered around, she would be grinning and cheering them on, but they wouldn’t be able to tell who she favored.

She observed, pretending to concentrate on the game, but in reality, she was evaluating her chat with Mr. Stone. She thought she’d presented herself well. She’d been flirtatious and appealing, and she’d blabbed family secrets too, so he would assume they were intimates already.

She’d deftly stabbed Wilhelmina in the back, but she’d done it kindly, as if Wilhelmina was a sympathetic character. Cassandra had sounded sweet and concerned about her cousin.

She tamped down a smirk of satisfaction. All in all, it had been worth it to waylay him, and no doubt, he would be assessing her in a whole new light.



ROBERT BOSWELL SCANNED THE parlor, appearing bored and nonchalant. Mrs. Milton invited the bachelors in the neighborhood to drop by for afternoon activities during her house parties. And, of course, he’d also come by that evening for the dancing. He was never asked to supper though, which was aggravating.

He was a gentleman’s son with no prospects. His father was a spendthrift, and the prior year, debt had driven them out of London. Robert was living with his parents, having been sent down from university for cheating on an exam, so now, he was a failed student who couldn’t even afford to buy a spot in the army as a second choice. His future was that dim, but he was wild for Cassandra.

They’d met soon after he’d arrived in the country, and from the very first moment, he’d been smitten. He’d asked Mrs. Milton if he could court her, and his request had been denied, so he’d had his mother ask on his behalf, but Mrs. Milton had refused again. She’d been quite rude about it too.

Robert couldn’t deduce why Mrs. Milton was so snobbish. The social level of the Milton family wasn’t much higher than that of the Boswell family. The main

difference was that the Miltons had held onto their money, so he didn't understand why she put on so many airs.

The room was packed with people, with the men playing cards, and the women watching. The stakes were for pennies, but he didn't have the funds even for that, so he affected a jaded attitude, as if he hated cards and they were beneath him.

He went to the sideboard where a footman was pouring wine. He accepted a glass, then casually studied the female guests. He wished he could set his sights on one of them, but the pathetic truth was that Cassandra was the only woman for him.

She was twenty-three, and he was twenty-one, and she thought she was too mature and too sophisticated for him, but she was wrong. He was exactly the fellow who could make her happy. She had a few vices, mostly that she imbibed alcohol to excess, and he used her bad habit to his own benefit.

She was sitting between Lord Drake and Mr. Stone. They were both tall, strapping rogues who commanded any room they entered. By comparison, Robert was a lesser version of everything. His blond hair was lank and already thinning on the top, and his blue eyes never sparkled with merriment. He was short too, just five-foot-nine in his boots, so when he stood next to Cassandra, they were nearly the same height.

She'd repeatedly told him she could never view him as a serious suitor, but he would lift her up on a pedestal and worship her forever. Lord Drake and Mr. Stone would never build a pedestal for her, would never love her, and he couldn't allow Mrs. Milton to give her away to someone who didn't deserve her. He ceaselessly plotted over how he could win her for his very own.

He ambled about so he was directly across from her, and he waited for her to glance up. Then he opened his coat so she could see that he was hiding a bottle inside. Her mother didn't permit her to drink spirits, not even wine, so she had to furtively indulge her whim, and he was eager to exacerbate the situation.

His own mother was a dreadful hypochondriac, and she bought a special elixir that was shipped from London. It was advertised to soothe feminine nerves and anxious dispositions. He had no idea what was in the concoction, but it certainly relaxed her. She purchased it by the crate, so she never noticed when any of it was missing.

It had a potent effect, and weeks earlier, he'd started offering it to Cassandra. Mrs. Milton scolded her about being too frisky, and the tonic calmed her so her vivacious tendencies weren't as obvious. The minute he arrived at Hill Haven, she'd

seek him out to discover if he'd brought more of it.

She raised a brow, then tipped her head to the verandah, indicating he should go out and meet her there. He nodded to let her know he'd received her message. He was delighted to do her bidding, and once she snuck away, he'd have her all to himself for as long as he could persuade her to tarry, which meant until she'd downed the contents of the bottle and it was empty.



“WHY IS THE SKY blue?”

“Because the Good Lord wanted it to be pretty.”

“Why is grass green?”

“Because it would be funny if it was red.”

Edna Stewart stared down at Charlie as he skipped toward their cottage. They'd walked to the village and were on their way back.

She didn't have many maternal inclinations, but she tried her best. Most days, when he was being particularly irksome, she yearned to shout at him to pipe down, to mind his manners, but he was a Dobbs through and through, so there was no chance of him ever exhibiting better behavior.

Telling him to behave was like ordering the wind not to blow.

“Why is your hair turning grey?” he asked. “Why isn't it all brown?”

“I'm getting older, Charlie. You know that.”

“But what makes it turn grey? Are you wearing out?”

“Yes, I'm wearing out.”

“Who are my parents? I'm six. Shouldn't I have a mother and father?”

This wasn't a question he'd posed before, but she should have expected it. As he'd just mentioned, he was six. Very soon, he'd be ten, then sixteen, then twenty. How long would Wilhelmina conceal the truth?

“You didn't have parents,” Edna said. “The fairies left you in the forest. Wilhelmina found you under a tree.”

He appeared incredibly dubious. “Did it really happen like that?”

“Would I lie to you?”

He scowled, but didn't answer. “Can she show me the tree?”

“She doesn't remember, and besides, it was in Scotland. It's too far away.”

Across the garden, she saw Blanche Milton. She never liked to bump into the horrid shrew, and she especially didn't like it to occur when she was with Charlie. He was exhausting proof of so much that was wrong at the estate, and Mrs. Milton was too cantankerous to abide.

"Charlie," Edna said, "why don't you race to the cottage without me? I have to talk to Mrs. Milton."

"May I have a slice of pie while I wait for you?"

"No. You had candy in the village."

"You never let me be happy."

She would have argued the point, but he ran off, relishing the opportunity to roam in the house when she wasn't there to watch his every move. Who could guess what sort of mischief he'd foment?

He was a constant trial, and it wasn't as if Wilhelmina would help control him. No, she dumped the parenting on Edna, but Edna had been reared in a society where children were silent and ignored, and he was so spoiled. *She* hadn't been the one to spoil him, but it was simply his Dobbs personality surging to the fore.

All of the Dobbs thought they should rule the world. He was only six, and he already thought that.

He flitted by Mrs. Milton, pausing long enough to bellow, "I don't have any parents. I was left under a tree by the fairies."

He continued on, and Mrs. Milton whipped her caustic gaze to Edna. Her stern glower told Edna that Charlie ought to be brought to heel, but as Edna had explained—over and over again!—she wasn't a mother, and she had no clue how to raise such a rambunctious, impertinent boy.

Mrs. Milton approached and scoffed. "The fairies, Edna? You couldn't think of a more suitable lie?"

Edna shrugged. "Wilhelmina can clarify it for him when he's older. I shouldn't have to."

"Your lack of concern for his welfare is disturbing—to say the least."

As if Blanche Milton had any right to chastise!

Edna might have offered an acerbic rejoinder, but she didn't. She and Mrs. Milton enjoyed a peculiar relationship. They were enemies, but they kept each other's secrets, so they were conspirators too. The situation had trapped them in a twisted knot that neither of them could figure out how to untangle.

"Why are you out in the garden?" Edna asked. "I rarely see you outside. Is

there a problem?"

"No. The manor is filled to the brim with young people, and I couldn't bear the revelry. I needed to catch my breath."

"I hear you have a good matrimonial candidate visiting. Actually, I hear there are two good candidates."

"If you're referring to Lord Drake, he's not available. He's bound for his cousin and always has been."

"But the other, Mr. Stone, what about him?"

"He's definitely in the running. His father recently inherited the family's earldom, so his bachelor sons have to marry in a hurry."

Edna sounded very snide. "My, my, that would be quite a coup for you, wouldn't it? What is Cassandra's opinion of him?"

"She likes him, but what's *not* to like? He's rich, dashing, and handsome—and he might wind up as an earl in the future. What more could a girl want?"

"What more indeed?"

Edna was biting her tongue so hard she was surprised she hadn't gnawed it bloody.

"Any news at the cottage?" Mrs. Milton asked.

"No, none."

"Mr. Stone hasn't been sniffing around, has he?"

"Not that I've observed, but hasn't he just arrived? When would he have had time to *sniff*?"

"I noticed him walking by himself today. I was merely curious as to where he'd been."

"It's not a crime for a single gentleman to stroll alone."

"I wouldn't like him to meet Wilhelmina."

"No, he shouldn't."

It was as close as Mrs. Milton would ever come to comparing Wilhelmina and Cassandra. Cassandra was fetching, but next to Wilhelmina, she was practically invisible. Wilhelmina possessed her father's charm and magnetism. There was an air about her that made men glom onto her to become her favorite, even though she never evinced the slightest interest in any of them.

She'd witnessed the behavior of too many scoundrels, and Jefferson had been the biggest one of all. But . . .

If a man ever tickled her fancy, and if that fellow happened to be dangling on

Cassandra's hook, Wilhelmina could lure him away without even trying.

"If he calls on her," Mrs. Milton said, "you'll let me know?"

"I am completely at your service."

The harpy nodded imperiously, then kept on. Edna tarried for a minute so her temper would calm.

Shortly after they'd moved to Hill Haven, when Jefferson had still been alive and the center of their world, she'd entered into her Devil's bargain with Blanche Milton. She'd watched Jefferson for Mrs. Milton and had reported his antics to her. Then, after he'd died, Mrs. Milton had had her start watching Wilhelmina.

Edna was paid to spy, though not in an amount that would ever allow her to traipse off by herself. Her greatest dream had always been to have a home of her own, to be safe and secure in it forever. Instead, she was tethered to Wilhelmina, and there was no way to cut the cord that connected them.

As a little girl, Edna had been forced to work for Wilhelmina's mother. After Jefferson had sent the poor woman to her grave, Edna had remained by his side to care for him.

She'd loved Jefferson with her whole heart and soul, and now, she was attached to Wilhelmina and couldn't separate herself. It was a magnet that held her tight, and she wasn't strong enough to pull away. Her predicament was infuriating, and there was no end in sight.

She stayed because she had nowhere else to go. She mothered Charlie when she didn't want to mother anybody. She tended Wilhelmina, while having to tolerate her quirks and arrogance, but she was tired of her subservient role.

Edna was compensated by Blanche for her treachery, and she wasn't sorry for her duplicity. The money was a tiny benefit, and Edna's life was so small and unfulfilling that she viewed it as a grand gesture. Why shouldn't she take it?

She'd served the Dobbs family for three maddening decades. What had it gotten her? Nothing. Nothing at all, and there was no escape.

Chapter Five



“OH, MY LORD, WHO is that?”

“Who do you mean?”

Warwick was loafing in a corner with Holden and Mrs. Smithwaite. Supper was over, and the evening entertainment of dancing and more card playing had started. The parlor was packed with people.

He searched the crowd, quickly seeing the person about whom Holden had inquired: Wilhelmina Dobbs had entered the room. She'd slipped in the verandah door, so she must have walked across the garden.

It was easy to understand Holden's rather shocked query. She was attired in a lavender gown that enhanced the white of her hair and blue of her eyes so they could have been violet. Her hair, for once, was tidily arranged in a fashionable chignon, a sparkling tiara weaved in the strands.

A lavender fan dangled from her wrist, and her slippers were lavender too, perfectly dyed to match her gown. She sported tasteful jewelry that glittered just enough to have him wondering if the gems weren't real. The outfit was so stylish and chic that she appeared too grand to rub elbows with the assembled rural company.

She was slender and willowy, with a refinement and grace to her stride and gestures that made it hard to look away. Add in the fact that she carried herself like a princess, and she was a sight to behold.

“That's Miss Dobbs,” he casually said. “She's a Milton cousin who lives in a cottage on the other side of the garden.”

“You know her . . . how?” Holden asked.

“I met her when I was out for a stroll.”

“Why haven't you introduced me? Were you hoping to keep her all to yourself?”

“Maybe. I haven’t decided.”

Mrs. Smithwaite chimed in with, “She’s stunning, isn’t she?”

Mrs. Smithwaite was a beauty in her own right, and so far, she’d been the richest, best-dressed female at the party. She wasn’t the type who would welcome any competition.

Holden snorted. “Are you jealous?”

“I think I should be,” Mrs. Smithwaite replied. “My goodness! I’m surprised Mrs. Milton would permit her to attend. Who will notice Cassandra when Miss Dobbs is in the room?”

“Why is she hiding in the country?” Holden asked Warwick. “She should be in London, dazzling the dandies and roués.”

“I’m betting she’s had some financial trouble,” Warwick explained. “Mrs. Milton provides her with lodging. I doubt she could afford to reside in town—or that she’d want to.”

“Why not?”

“She’s a poor relative.”

Holden snickered rudely. “She could stay with me, and I wouldn’t charge her any rent.”

Mrs. Smithwaite elbowed him. “Your lechery is showing. Stop drooling over her. It’s embarrassing.”

“Sorry.” But Holden wasn’t sorry. He looked as if he was about to march over and tender an indiscreet proposal.

“Her father was the famous painter, Jefferson Dobbs,” Warwick told them.

“No!” they crowed together.

“She’s tucked away at Hill Haven, but I’m certain—in a previous period—she was accustomed to extravagance.”

“That much is obvious,” Holden said. “How did she come by that air of mystery? Do you imagine she practices it in the mirror?”

“She’s just very exotic,” Warwick said. “There’s something . . . *intriguing* about her that is difficult to quantify.”

They silently studied her. The women in the crowd pretended she was invisible, likely because her status as an unwed mother was common knowledge among the neighbors, but numerous gentlemen had rushed over to greet her. She was simply too divine to be ignored for long.

She chatted with them, supplying an impression of royalty again, as if she was

lowering herself by consorting with lesser mortals.

"I should rescue her," Holden said.

"No, you shouldn't," Warwick hurried to retort. "If she needs rescuing, *I* shall be her champion."

Mrs. Smithwaite smirked at both of them. "She doesn't require assistance from either of you. She's able to handle her admirers all on her own."

"She promised to dance with me," Warwick said, "and I'm supposing that's why she's here. I should find out."

"If she promised to dance with you," Holden said, "it sounds as if you two have already gotten friendly, but aren't you meant to be flirting with Miss Milton?"

"I've fulfilled my obligation to her for the evening by partnering with her for the opening set. I'm now free to socialize with any lady I choose."

He sauntered off, but slowly, not eager to race to her side like every other dolt in the room. It was very strange, but he might have been out of his body, hovered up above and observing as some other confused gentleman struggled to figure out his purpose.

From the moment he'd met her, an attraction had flared, but it was pointless and probably even a tad dangerous. Why fan the flames so they burned any hotter?

After he departed Hill Haven, he wouldn't return for a subsequent visit. Unless a remarkable alteration occurred during the remainder of the week, he wouldn't betroth himself to Cassandra Milton. She was too young, and she wasn't amazing or different. If they'd wed, she would have bored him to tears before the first month was out.

He was also irked by how she'd revealed Miss Dobbs' scandal. She'd divulged the particulars in a petty, almost gleeful way, and he couldn't deduce why she'd mentioned it. So . . . no. Once he left, he wouldn't be back, so he'd have no excuse to see Miss Dobbs again. Why start a liaison he couldn't pursue to an acceptable conclusion?

He was still trying to determine his opinion about the news that she was a fallen woman. He spent his time around slatterns, so it would be the height of hypocrisy to condemn her, but he was extremely curious about the cretin who'd seduced her.

How, where, and when had it happened? Why hadn't she confessed his identity? Might she have been forced?

The fact that she was ruined presented many possibilities. Since she wasn't an

innocent virgin, he could push her to risqué conduct without feeling guilty. Might she be amenable to an amour? But, when he was Mrs. Milton's guest and she was hoping he'd propose to her daughter, was it wise to instigate an affair with one of her relatives?

Should he dive deeper into a romance with Miss Dobbs? What were the benefits? What were the detriments?

Hill Haven was a small place, so if they misbehaved, the risk of discovery was very high. If he was caught in a *mésalliance*, it would stir a huge controversy. Would Miss Dobbs be worth it? He was certain she would be.

When he finally reached her, he realized he was nervous as a green boy.

"Miss Dobbs!" He was smiling like an idiot. "I can't believe you came to the party. I was beginning to think you wouldn't bother."

"I decided I should enjoy myself for a change."

"Shall we dance? A set is about to commence."

"Oh, I'm sorry, but several gentlemen jumped in ahead of you." Her luscious eyes sparkled with wicked merriment. "I'm afraid you'll have to wait your turn."

With that, another fellow whisked her away, and Warwick could barely stop himself from fighting over her. He was enraged as a spurned suitor, and his level of aggravation was so bizarre that he had to physically work to prevent his irritation from showing. He tarried until his disposition and expression were under control, then he calmly strolled to his spot in the corner.

Holden had been dragged onto the floor by a debutante, so Mrs. Smithwaite was there by herself.

"Why aren't you dancing?" she asked.

"Why aren't you?" His tone was surlier than it should have been.

"Did Miss Dobbs reject you?"

"She has partners lined up out the door, so I missed my chance."

"You poor dear," Mrs. Smithwaite sarcastically crooned. "You're so vain. Your ego must be absolutely crushed."

"I may never recover," Warwick facetiously replied.

"It's hot and stuffy in here. Would you like to walk in the garden?"

If he'd been in a normal mood, he'd have gladly agreed. She'd been dangling hints for weeks that she'd like a closer acquaintance, and he was precisely cognizant of what would transpire out in a secluded alcove. He should have been excited to accompany her, but he was pathetically keen to watch Miss Dobbs as she sashayed by.

"I don't feel like walking, but I'd like a glass of wine. Might I bring you one?"

She recognized his response as a rebuff to an assignation. If she was irked, she hid it well. "I'm fine. You go on though."

He went to the adjoining parlor, where footmen were dispensing beverages, and he lurked for a bit, debating his situation.

Was he besotted with Miss Dobbs? He barely knew her, so how could it be? And even if he *was* besotted, why would he snub Mrs. Smithwaite? He never refused what was freely offered, so why would one of them have any bearing on the other?

He dawdled, ate some food, then spied on Miss Dobbs. It took over an hour until, finally, he escorted her out to the floor. He was able to touch and twirl her, able to hold her hand as they promenaded. They laughed and marched through the steps together.

Much too soon, the tune ended. It had been an enjoyable frolic, and everyone clapped for the musicians. Miss Dobbs dipped a curtsy to him and said, "Thank you for obliging me, Mr. Stone. You're an excellent dancer."

"It was my pleasure, Miss Dobbs."

She leaned in and murmured, "I'll be outside. Come out when you can. Don't hurry and don't be obvious."

He might have been a condemned man who'd been granted a reprieve. She winked at him, then sauntered away.

A new set was forming, couples moving to participate, so he slipped out of their way. There were numerous young ladies seated along the wall, casting blatant glances at him, wishing they could be his next partner, but he kept his furtive focus on Miss Dobbs.

She departed, and he tarried for a few minutes, then followed at a leisurely pace. He walked out to the verandah and over to the balustrade, but he couldn't see her, so he ambled down into the grass, figuring *she* would find him.

He'd gone quite a distance, and was nearly to her cottage, when he realized he'd arrived at the bench where he'd first stumbled on her. She was sitting there, grinning, and he rushed over. As she pulled him down to join her, he fell on her like a feral animal.

His lips captured hers in a torrid kiss, and they were incredibly reckless, not pausing to wonder if they might be observed. They simply proceeded—without sense or caution.

How was he to explain such wild, desperate yearning? He'd never suffered such potent desire with any paramour, so there were no rules to clarify what was

occurring.

After an eternity, they slowed and eased apart. They scrutinized each other, hunting for clues as to what was driving them. If they were caught, it would be a disaster, but apparently, they didn't care about any consequences. Their attraction was that overwhelming.

"You minx!" he said. "You attended the party as I demanded, then you ignored me."

"I didn't ignore you. We danced."

"It was only once!" he complained. "Then you skittered off like a frightened rabbit."

"Of course I did and don't be a brat about it. You know we couldn't appear overly cordial. If I'd tried, Blanche would have wrung my neck. She might still wring it—merely because I dared to show up."

"Aren't you a regular guest?"

"I'm always welcome at any soiree, but she's not sincere about including me. She asks, but we both understand I shouldn't accept."

"You don't get along with her?"

"Maybe *she* doesn't get along with me. I'm a difficult person to tolerate."

He sighed, his arms enfolding her, so her body was snuggled to his all the way down.

"Your existence sounds horrid to me," he said.

She shrugged. "I've lived in better circumstances, and I've lived in worse. This one isn't so bad."

"Where did you grow up? Not here, I don't think."

"No. I traveled around Europe with my father."

"Where in Europe?"

"Everywhere. Whenever he received a commission for a portrait, we'd pack our bags and move."

"It must have been thrilling."

She shrugged again. "It was and it wasn't. I developed a very cosmopolitan attitude that doesn't fit in rural England. I'm very independent too, so I'm a pariah. I have a taste for luxury that I probably shouldn't have acquired."

"You definitely light up a room when you enter it. You strolled in, and all the men were agog."

She smirked. "I was hoping to make you jealous."

"I was green with it," he said.

"Ha! I like knowing I succeeded."

"Have I told you you're a minx?"

"I always have been. I possess too many of my father's awful traits. In him, they were deemed to be bold and interesting, but in me, they're deemed inappropriate and brash."

"Why do you stay at Hill Haven? You don't seem to belong here."

"As a child, I never really lived anywhere, so I view my cottage to be a huge gift. I never annoy Blanche because I can't give her an excuse to yank it away from me." She hesitated, then admitted, "I have two people I support. If I carried on outrageously and was evicted, *they* would be evicted with me."

"Who are you supporting?"

He figured one of them was her son, and he speculated over how he could politely raise the topic. Unfortunately, there was no courteous route to accomplish it.

He was debating a suitable query, when she said, "Would you answer a question for me?"

"If I can."

"If it's too forward, you can tell me to mind my own business."

"What is it you'd like to know?"

"Why are you at Hill Haven? Are you considering marriage to Cassandra?"

Before he could contemplate the wisdom of candor, he blurted out, "I have been *considering* whether to consider it. My father and her mother thought we might be a good match, but now that I've met her, I have to disagree with their assessment." He winced. "I can't believe I stated that out loud. Please don't repeat it. I'd be so embarrassed if word spread about my opinion."

"Don't worry. Your secrets are safe with me."

"It's not that there's anything wrong with her," he hurried to say, as if they'd been arguing about Miss Milton's qualities. "I'm a confirmed bachelor, and I'm sophisticated in a manner she's not. She seems very immature to me."

"She's twenty-three, but she can be juvenile in her conduct and choices."

"It's what I've noticed."

"Are you avidly searching for a bride? After you're finished with the Miltons, will you rush to London and have your father drum up another candidate?"

"Gad, no. I never wanted to come here in the first place. My father nagged at me until I couldn't help but relent."

She laughed. "You don't sound like a fellow who's eager to be a husband."

"I'm not eager. My blasted father—for reasons only the gods can explain—suddenly inherited our family's earldom."

"Your father's an earl? My, my, but aren't I wallowing in grand company?"

"We were never grand, so don't assume you're sitting with someone magnificent."

"Oh, I would never think that," she sarcastically said.

"In the past, we were so far out on a tiny branch of the family tree that you could hardly see how we were attached to everybody else. We never expected to be in the midst of things, but our uncles and cousins kept dying on us, and we couldn't stop it."

She clucked her tongue in mock commiseration. "You poor baby. Now you're in line to wind up being pompous and important."

"Well, my father is already there, and my older brother is too. I'm simply dangling below them, wondering why I have to behave myself."

"You previously mentioned you're a scoundrel."

"I am, and I love my bachelor's existence, but my father insists we marry immediately. If I ponder the situation too deeply, I might break out in hives."

She laughed again. "How many brothers do you have?"

"Just two: Hunter and Sheridan. Hunter obeyed my father and swiftly wed a girl he barely knew. That conclusion still has my head spinning."

"And Sheridan?"

"At the moment, he's out to sea on a very big, very fast ship, so he hasn't been home and subject to my father's badgering, but once he's back in England, he'll be roped into my father's scheme."

They were silent for a bit, then she said, "I wish the world was different."

"How would you restructure it?"

"I would like to be as free as a man. Then I could dally with you, and it wouldn't be viewed as odd or debauched."

The comment startled him. "You can dally with me. I'm fine with that idea, and I'd never tell."

"I reside in a cottage on a small, rural estate, and I'm a tad notorious. People gossip about me constantly, so I couldn't attempt an affair."

"I like loose women though. By any chance, might you be loose?"

"I hope you're joking with that remark, and I won't dignify it with a response."

Even if I claimed I was loose, and I thought I could get away with an amour, do I look reckless enough to pursue one?"

"Yes, definitely."

She scoffed with disgust. "I can't decide if you insulted me or hurt my feelings."

"You're amazing, and I doubt I could be swayed in that opinion, but may I ask *you* a question?"

"I suppose, but I'm not sure I'll answer."

"I was talking to Cassandra about you."

"Uh-oh. When a sentence begins that way, it never ends well for me. She doesn't exactly hold me in the highest regard."

"Why is that?"

"It's not that strange of a story. We should be close, and when we were younger, I used to pretend she was my sister. I rarely saw her though, so I didn't realize how little we had in common. After I came here permanently, it was too clear to ignore."

"Why does she dislike you so much?"

"We've had a difficult history. Could we leave it at that? I shouldn't discuss her, especially with you being at Hill Haven to consider marrying her. There's no detail I could impart that wouldn't make me sound petty and envious."

She gazed at him with a steely glower that warned him to butt out, but he never heeded women, so he forged ahead despite her being irked.

"She told me you were ruined a few years ago, that you had a child."

"And . . . ?"

"Do you have a child?"

"If I admit it, will you castigate me for being a harlot? Will you claim you're mortified to the marrow of your bones, then stomp off in a huff? Please clarify the basis for your query so I'll have a hint as to how you'll react to whatever reply I furnish."

He tsked with offense. "Give me some credit, would you? I'm not a naïve country dolt. I'm aware that tragedy can strike in a person's life."

"You're an unrepentant cad, Mr. Stone. Have you any natural children?"

"No."

"Good for you. I'm delighted to hear it."

"I notice you haven't denied my accusation," he said, "although I don't mean it

as an accusation. Would you tell me what happened? I'd truly like to know."

She wrinkled up her nose. "I'd rather not."

Her expression didn't provide a clue as to what she was thinking. She didn't appear furious or dismayed, but how could he be certain?

"Have I upset you?" he asked. "You're not about to slap my face and call me a monster, are you?"

She snickered. "No. I'm not the type to slap or shout at anyone. My father was, but not me."

"You have a son. What's his name?"

"Charlie."

"May I meet him?"

"I wouldn't go out of my way to introduce you, but if you stay the whole week, you'll probably bump into him."

"You are angry with me, aren't you? You're pretending you're not, but you are. I can sense it."

"My entire life—mostly because of who my father was—I've had a bright light shined on me. Usually, it's been with negative effect. I don't explain myself, and I never defend myself. Over the years, I've learned that it's futile."

"I like loose women, remember?"

"Would you be silent?"

"No."

He dipped in and kissed her again, and for a brief instant, she stiffened in protest, then she joined in, so evidently, he hadn't wrecked their affection.

"I have an idea," he said once their lips finally parted.

"Why am I suspecting I won't like it?"

"You'll like it. I'm positive." When he wanted something, he never dithered. No doubt he should have pondered a bit prior to continuing, but he ran to the cliff's edge and jumped over. "I'll be here for several more days. Let's have an affair."

"*That* is your idea?"

"It's not as if you're a sheltered debutante who has to protect her virtue. Let's misbehave. Say *yes*. Say you will."

"You are insane. I just told you why I can't."

"Yes, but you're not a green girl, and we have a stunning attraction. We should act on it."

"Have you even the slightest notion of what would happen to me if we were

caught? First and foremost, Blanche would evict me. Then where would I be?"

"You could move to London and be my mistress. I'd support you. You'd be fine."

The words burst out before he realized they were perched on the tip of his tongue.

He *never* had a mistress, but he was so obsessed with her that he was willing to carry on in an unhinged manner merely to keep her by his side. He would return to London shortly, and already, he was recognizing how painful it would be to separate from her.

He couldn't shake the perception that she had been thrown into his path for a reason, and he wouldn't be able to rid himself of her until he discovered what it was. He'd have a wild ride with her, and there would never be a dull moment.

"Move to London?" She was aghast. "You'd support me? How long would this glorious arrangement last?"

"I can't begin to guess. You've overwhelmed me so completely that I'm tossing out proposals without much thought behind them. We can debate the details later on. I'm open to any suggestions." He leaned in and nibbled at her nape. "I'd buy you all the paintbrushes you ever required."

"Stop that." She shoved him away and scooted to the end of the bench, but there wasn't much space to escape. "I can't focus when you're chomping on my neck."

"Marvelous. I like to have you confused and bewildered. It will make you easier to manipulate."

"If you think you can manipulate me, you've misconstrued the kind of person I am."

"No, I haven't." Fondness flooded his eyes. "When I bragged that you're amazing, I wasn't joking."

"I *am* amazing," she pompously agreed. "I won't argue the point."

"I'll leave in a few days. Could you bear to never see me again? Tell me the truth. I understand that we just met, but doesn't it feel as if we've always been romantically attached?"

"Is that what's occurring? Are we romantically attached?"

"Don't deny it. There's an odd fire that ignites when we're together. Wouldn't you like to learn where it might lead?"

"I'm sure—from past experience—that I grasp exactly where I would wind up with you."

"You'd like it," he slyly said. "I promise you'd be happy."

She snorted. "You're like the snake in the Garden of Eden. I ought to consent merely to prove you wrong."

"If I promise I'll make you happy, then I will."

She chuckled, but miserably. "You are so charming, and it exhausts me."

"Well, I'm an exhausting fellow. *And* I'm charming. You've pegged me correctly on both counts."

She studied him, choosing her words, then she said, "I won't ever be any man's mistress. I especially won't glom onto an aristocrat's son and be paraded to your friends as your newest conquest."

"It wouldn't be like that."

"Yes, it would. I traveled in Europe with my father for two decades, so I've witnessed the schemes of powerful men. The women never end up being glad."

"I beg to differ. I wallow in the demimonde, where I am surrounded by females who can't follow society's rules. Aren't *you* a female who hates rules? Wouldn't you be more content if you could revel however you pleased?"

"If I was younger and more frivolous, I might consider your offer, but I can't forget that I have people who are depending on me."

"Who are they? Your son and . . . who?"

"My Aunt Edna. She stayed with us after my mother died. She raised me, and she watches Charlie, so I can paint. I have a duty to her that can never be fully repaid."

"I would take care of them too. You wouldn't have to fret about them." He scooted across the bench so he was pressed to her again, and he kissed her fiercely. "Come to London and be my mistress."

"I can't be so reckless."

He assessed her magnificent eyes, seeing a ton of obstinacy there. For the moment, she wouldn't budge, but he always got his way. Eventually, he'd persuade her to relent; he was convinced of it.

He shrugged, as if he was giving up. "It was worth a shot. What if you'd said *yes*?"

"If I'd said *yes*, you'd have regretted it immediately, and you'd have instantly been devising a method to renege."

"I doubt that very much," he told her. "I can't leave you alone."

"No, you shouldn't ignore me. It's been ages since a handsome bachelor noticed me, and I enjoy your amorous antics."

“May I keep bothering you about London? Once a notion lodges in my head, I can’t pry it out.”

“I guess you can bother me. It will make me laugh over how ridiculous you are, but when I continue to refuse, don’t grow surly. Don’t pout.”

He huffed with feigned offense. “I never pout.”

“I’m certain that’s a lie. You are so spoiled, and when I won’t join in your insane idea, you’ll pout until you’re in your grave.”

They sat, cataloguing features and pondering what their next comment should be. As to himself, he was stunned speechless. By declining his wicked proposition, she’d saved him from himself, and he should have been relieved that he’d dodged a bullet, but he wasn’t.

Instead, he was awash with a thousand conflicting emotions. He wanted to be with her forever; he never wanted to be with any woman for an extended period. He’d like to leap into an affair with her; he never had affairs. He was anxious to permanently bind her; he never bound himself.

He shouldn’t have been surprised by his diverse sentiments. She simply exuded bizarre powers, and he’d been ensnared in her web. How would he ever pull himself away? Why would he pull away?

“Who were your parents?” he asked. “I mean, I realize your father was Jefferson Dobbs, but what was his background? What was your mother’s?”

“Why would you be curious about that?”

“I’d like to know what sort of people created you.”

“My father was a gentleman’s son, but they were very poor. He won a scholarship that sent him away to school, and a teacher recognized his talent.”

“What about your mother?”

“She was the teacher’s daughter.”

“Was it a happy match?”

She was silent, not responding, then she said, “I should probably go.”

“Why won’t you talk about your past?”

“I never talk about myself, and you’re so accursedly nosy. Quit asking so many questions, and shouldn’t you get going too?”

“I suppose I should. My friends likely assume I fell into a hole out here. I can’t believe they haven’t been searching for me.”

They didn’t move though. They were too busy smiling and sighing. Gad, if he wasn’t careful, he’d start spouting poetry!

“Would you call me Warwick?”

“I will, but just in private. If Blanche was nearby, I wouldn’t dare. And you have to call me Wilhelmina.”

She was the one to stand up first. She stared down at him, then bent down and stole a kiss of her own.

“I like you more than I should,” she said.

“What a silly remark. Of course you should like me. Every woman does.”

“If you’re bored tomorrow, visit me. I’ll be in my studio.”

“If you issue an open invitation, I can guarantee I will become a total nuisance. You’ll never be rid of me.”

“I have a few days to revel in your delightful company, so I better have my fill of you before you flit off to town.”

He grinned. “You think I’m delightful?”

“Yes, but that’s the only time I’ll admit it.”

He clasped hold of her hand. “Come back to the party with me.”

“I can’t. It was mad for me to show my face there at all. I can’t waltz in twice on the same evening.”

She squeezed his fingers in farewell, then sauntered away, and he dawdled, listening as her footsteps faded. He thought he’d hear a door closing, but it was quiet. He should have jumped up and left too, but he tarried, reflecting on how he was being horrid to his hostess.

He should have been inside the house, chatting with Cassandra Milton, but instead, he’d frolicked in the garden with a completely inappropriate female. He’d vanished for an eternity. Most shocking of all, he’d almost wound up with a mistress!

He shook his head—with amazement, with disgust, with dismay over his reckless tendencies that always landed him in jams—then he rose and went to the manor. He hoped he hadn’t been missed, but with his being the guest of honor, he couldn’t expect to be invisible.

Chapter Six



WILHELMINA WAS STANDING AT her easel, when the tingling started on the back of her neck again. Trouble had arrived, and she sighed, both with exasperation and amusement, then she spun to find Warwick leaned in the doorway.

Since she'd dallied with him the prior evening, she hadn't slept. She'd been too excited to doze off. She'd tiptoed into the cottage to change her clothes, then she'd snuck to the studio and had unleashed a creative frenzy.

He'd asked her to be his mistress! It was shocking, but it hadn't been all that astonishing. They might have known each other forever; they were that fondly attached. Why shouldn't he have tendered an indecent proposal?

If she'd been an innocent Miss, she'd have been aghast, but there wasn't anything innocent about her. There was an added benefit, too, that he'd traveled to Hill Haven to assess Cassandra as a bride, but he liked Wilhelmina more than her cousin. She was petty enough to be pleased by that turn of events.

She was feeling wild and out of control, her nerves jangled as they always were when she'd worked through the night. She was unnaturally energized, and it seemed as if she could point her fingers and sparks would fly from the tips. With her being so on edge, he was the very last person with whom she should chat.

"Hello, Warwick," she said, relishing the chance to use his Christian name.

"If it isn't my precious, Wilhelmina. It's only one o'clock in the afternoon. Why are you working already?"

"I painted all night."

"You haven't been to bed yet?"

"I tried to nap, but I was thinking about you so furiously that I couldn't relax."

"Ooh, I just love it when a beautiful woman can't get me out of her mind."

He came over to her and pulled her into his arms to deliver a stirring kiss that

left her even more rattled. What would she do with herself after he departed?

It was so rare when her small, dull life was enlivened, and she was staring down the road to the dreary days that would confront her after he vanished back to London. It made her wish, rather stupidly, that they hadn't met.

Briefly, she wallowed in the embrace, then she eased away. There were big windows across one wall, and the sun was shining in, illuminating the place. Foliage blocked her from the garden, but she wasn't totally invisible. From certain angles, it was possible to see directly inside.

Edna or Charlie could pop in too, and she didn't want either of them to catch her in the middle of a torrid tryst she couldn't explain. She could never clarify her conduct to them because she had no idea what was driving her. Warwick Stone was magnetic and dashing, and she was lonely and bored. He was determined to shower her with affection. How could she resist?

"Behave yourself," she scolded.

"I can't behave. You simply goad me to outrageous levels of passion. When I'm around you, I can't restrain my worst impulses."

"Well, I can't have anybody note you lurking in here. How would I justify your presence?"

"We can pretend I'm your new assistant."

"Ha! You're too lazy and spoiled for that to be true."

She cocked her head, studying his handsome face, his glorious blond hair. He resembled a pirate, or maybe a Viking who would wade ashore to loot a village and abscond with the virtuous maidens.

"Would you do me a favor?" she said.

"That depends on what it is."

"Would you let me sketch you?"

"I might, but what's in it for me?" he asked.

"You'd have my undivided attention—all of it completely focused on your grand self."

"I'm very vain, so I imagine that might be wonderful."

"I'd offer to paint you, but you won't be in residence long enough."

"Then that's another reason you should move to London with me."

She laid a finger on his lips. "We're not mentioning that little scheme aloud. If you were overheard, I'd be in so much trouble."

"I will simply whisper it in your ear, over and over again, as a temptation."

She pointed to a chair in the corner. "Sit over there and be quiet. You're such a distraction. I can't guess if I'll be able to accomplish any task with you in here."

Like an obedient puppy, he surprised her by complying. He went over and plopped down, and for several minutes, she tried to ignore him, but it was like having a huge elephant wander in. She threw down her brush and whirled around.

"What's wrong?" he asked. He appeared innocent as a choirboy, but he was aware of the effect he was having on her.

"How am I supposed to carry on with you gawking at me?"

"You told me to sit, and I must admit that it's fascinating to watch you. As for myself, I'd like it if we enjoyed other activities."

"There's a wicked gleam in your eye, so I have no doubt as to what you're contemplating."

"I look at you, and I'm overwhelmed by risqué thoughts. Why is that?"

"You're a cad. I'm sure it has nothing to do with me at all. You stare at every female with lust in your gaze, and at the moment, I'm the only one in the room."

He snorted at that. "I may be a cad, but I have very high standards. If you weren't gorgeous and captivating, I wouldn't have noticed you."

"A likely story."

Suddenly, footsteps sounded outside. She glanced over to see two people approaching, and she was frightfully glad he was in the chair and she was over by her easel.

It was a man and a woman, and they were an arresting couple, the man tall, dark, and imperious, the woman short, pretty, and voluptuous. From the cut of their clothes and the confidence in their strides, it was obvious they were rich and viewed themselves as important and entitled.

"Mr. Stone!" the woman said. "There you are. You snuck off again, and we decided to follow you to learn where you've been hiding."

"Hello, Mrs. Smithwaite," he said to her, then he scowled at the man. "Why would you spy on me? Are you my nanny?"

"We're not spying," the man insisted. "We were bored in the house, and we figured—wherever you'd gone—it would have to be more amusing than what we'd been provided as entertainment."

Warwick stood and walked over to Wilhelmina. He escorted her over to them and said, "This is my new friend, Miss Wilhelmina Dobbs. Miss Dobbs, this is Lord Drake and Mrs. Smithwaite."

“Welcome to my studio.” Wilhelmina nodded, but didn’t show any other sign of deference.

She wasn’t in a good state to receive visitors. She was attired in the outfit she usually donned when she was working. It included a pair of her father’s old trousers that had been stained with a thousand paint droplets. The pants were covered by a smock, so it seemed as if she was wearing a dress, but the trousers gave her greater freedom of movement.

She had boots on her feet, and they were paint-splotted too. Her hair was up in an untidy chignon that was barely held in place by a paintbrush handle. Various strands refused to be bound and floated about her cheeks and shoulders.

Mrs. Smithwaite looked her up and down, then she flashed an insincere smile and cooed, “Aren’t you precious?”

Wilhelmina recognized she’d been insulted, but she didn’t rise to the woman’s bait. “I apologize that I’m not in a better condition. I’m busy *and* I wasn’t expecting company.” Her tone was snotty and annoyed, so they would understand she didn’t care to have them stop by without warning. She wouldn’t want them to make a habit of it.

“Miss Dobbs is an artist,” Warwick said, as if they hadn’t deduced it themselves. “Her father was the celebrated portraitist, Jefferson Dobbs.” He halted, then asked her, “May I tell them that? Is it irritating for you to have it announced? It sounds as if you’re not a talented person in your own right.”

“It’s fine,” Wilhelmina said. “My only claim to fame is my being his daughter. I’m happy to flaunt the designation whenever I can use it to impress others.”

Lord Drake asked, “What was it like to have such a notorious father? When you were growing up, did you realize he was a genius? Or did you simply consider him your dear papa?”

“From my earliest memories, I knew he was renowned, mostly because he constantly bragged about how brilliant he was. He was very arrogant.”

“And flamboyant too, wasn’t he?” Mrs. Smithwaite said. “I once heard he was incredibly handsome and debonair.”

“Yes, all the ladies loved him, and he loved them back, so he was always ensnared in romantic foibles.”

Wilhelmina rarely talked about her father, but she never minded a recitation of his penchant for affairs. His amorous gaffes had been legendary, and it was part of the fable that supported his lofty reputation.

Mrs. Smithwaite led Lord Drake over to the wall where Wilhelmina’s finished

canvases were stacked. They snooped through them, while Wilhelmina gaped at Warwick and shot him a glare, informing him she didn't like to have them poking their noses into her business.

He shrugged, as if she was being silly, then he loafed with them, as they oohed and aahed over her many efforts.

The collection comprised her favorite spots around the property, but also a smattering of portraits. She didn't attempt that many, merely because she seldom crossed paths with eager subjects. No one was ever keen for a female to do it anyway.

Mrs. Smithwaite pulled out a portrait of Charlie. She showed it to Wilhelmina and said, "This little scamp is adorable. Who is he?"

"He's just . . . a boy here at Hill Haven."

"Could I have it?" the brazen woman inquired.

Wilhelmina didn't know if the bloody harpy was demanding to have it for free or if she meant she'd pay for it, but Wilhelmina said, "I'm sorry, but I don't sell my paintings."

"They're spectacular," Lord Drake said, and he seemed cordial. "You ought to sell them."

"I don't like to," Wilhelmina replied, "and most people would deem it to be shocking. After my father's wild decades, I try not to ever stir a controversy to which the Dobbs name would be attached."

"Have you ever entered any of them in a competition?" he asked.

"I've thought about it, but with my being a female, I doubt I could."

"The Royal Exhibition is approaching," he said, "and I have acquaintances who serve on the Board of Directors. I'll check if you can enter or not. I'll find out for you."

The Royal Exhibition was an annual display of the works of England's greatest artists. It was held at a meeting hall in London. For a two-week period, hundreds of paintings were open for viewing by the public. The pieces were judged, and the winners received cash prizes. Along with the money, that was always welcome, the finalists were showered with an enormous amount of prestige for being singled out.

Her father had won several times, and she was vain enough to suppose she was better than he'd been. She would cut off her right arm to be able to enter, but she kept her expression blank and said, "It's very kind of you to offer, Lord Drake. If you learn it's possible for me to participate, I would be grateful to be apprised."

They turned their attention to another stack of canvases, and she glowered at

Warwick and made a shooing motion toward the door. He bit down a chuckle and diverted them so they quit looking.

“Miss Dobbs is very busy,” he said, “so she can’t satisfy your curiosity.”

Lord Drake scoffed at him. “Are you kicking us out?”

“Yes,” Warwick said. “She and I are having an important discussion, and you’ve interrupted.”

“What are you discussing?” Lord Drake asked. “I’m just dying to hear.”

“I’d like to have her paint my father,” Warwick said, a blatant lie, “but she’s resistant, and I’m persuading her. There’s been no portrait of him since he was a young man. I planned it to be a Christmas gift.”

“He’s an intriguing devil,” Mrs. Smithwaite said to Wilhelmina. “You’d be lucky to spend hours gazing at him.”

Lord Drake added, “But don’t ever let him drag you off by yourself. Be sure there’s a chaperone in the room.”

Warwick explained to her, “My father is a libertine, and he never met a woman he didn’t try to seduce.”

“It’s why Warwick is such a scoundrel,” Lord Drake said. “He takes after his father exactly.”

Warwick herded the pair to the door, and she should have thanked them for coming, but she didn’t utter a cordial comment. It might have encouraged them to stop by again. He watched them stroll away, and once they vanished, he spun and grinned.

“It’s a good thing we weren’t misbehaving,” he said.

“Are they your friends?”

“Lord Drake always has been, but Mrs. Smithwaite is new to me. She’s a rich widow who isn’t mourning her deceased spouse. She’s set her sights on a few gentlemen and would like to keep company with them.”

“Lord Drake seems amenable, but how about you? Are you on her list of candidates?”

“She’s a tad too forward for my tastes, but I wouldn’t necessarily cast her aside if she started pestering me. I just adore loose tarts, so I’d probably grab hold before she changed her mind.”

“It sounds as if you are a genuine rutting dog, Warwick Stone.”

“If I trifled with her, would you be jealous?”

“Absolutely. While you’re at Hill Haven, I intend to possessively pretend you

belong to me, so please remember that as you're preening for all the ladies."

"I will remember it, and I like it that you're feeling possessive. It means I'm wearing you down, and shortly, you'll be a strumpet."

"You're so arrogant," she said, "but I like you anyway."

"I always convince females to give me what I want in the end."

"Apparently, it's a family trait, handed down from father to son."

"You'd like my father. He's an interesting character."

"I'm not painting his portrait."

He snickered. "I made that up. On the spur of the moment, I can be an excellent liar."

She laughed at that. "I don't like Lord Drake and Mrs. Smithwaite. Can you keep them from coming back?"

"I'll try, but the days are tedious in the manor. There are only so many hours where a person can play cards or listen to a mediocre performer plunk out a tune on the pianoforte. It grows boring very fast, so if they wind up out here, I might not even know they were walking in the garden."

"Isn't there a hunt in the morning? It should enliven things for you."

"Will you join in? Are you a huntress?"

"I don't like to kill animals for sport."

"How about for food?"

"Yes, I like to eat, so I guess I'm a hypocrite."

He sauntered over to her, and despite the fact that they'd just had unexpected visitors, he wasn't alarmed by the near disaster. He pulled her close to nuzzle at her nape, and goosebumps prickled down her arms.

"There's to be another soiree tonight," he said, "with more dancing. Will you come?"

"If I attended two evenings in a row, I'd likely give Blanche an apoplexy."

"We needn't worry about her. We should focus on how often we can be together before I leave. I'm anxious to spend more time with you. Do you ride?"

"Yes, but I couldn't *ride* with you."

"I can't think of how else to get you off alone, so I suppose I'll have to let you sketch me. It will furnish me with an excuse to loaf in your studio."

She struggled to imagine several lazy afternoons, where they'd drink wine, chat, and she'd draw him, but she couldn't picture it. Blanche would find out, and Wilhelmina would be ordered to pack a bag and vacate the premises until he was

gone. Blanche would be that determined that no romance flared.

"I can't sketch you," she said. "It's not possible."

"I could sneak over later, after the party is over. We could lock ourselves in. No one would know."

As she'd always understood, she had her father's wicked blood flowing in her veins. The risqué proposition lit a spark to every debauched tendency that had ever tantalized her.

For a fleeting instant, she allowed a vision to bubble up, of him sequestered with her. She had the tiny bedroom behind her easels. They could shut the door and misbehave. The idea sent a surge of excitement flowing through her, one that was so potent she was surprised her knees didn't buckle.

She chuckled miserably and eased away from him.

"You tempt me beyond my limit," she said.

"Good."

"But I'm still not sketching you, and you're not sneaking over after dark. We're not dallying."

"We're not?"

He pulled her to him again, and as he nibbled a trail up her neck, she pushed him away.

"I've been encouraging you when I shouldn't have," she said, "and I'm receiving the distinct impression that you view this situation as some sort of game. You travelled to Hill Haven to meet my cousin, but you don't like her, so you have to fill your dreary minutes. You're trying to *fill* them with me, but I have to stop obliging you."

"You're wrong to assess it like that. I'm in your studio because I'm completely obsessed with you. After I depart, it's not as if I'll have a reason to visit again. I could only return if I decided to call on your cousin, which won't ever occur."

"You're acting as if you're besotted, and it's scaring me."

"Don't be absurd. You're not afraid of anything."

"I'm afraid of what I might do for you. I'm afraid of what the consequences might be."

"We'll be careful. Don't fret so much."

"If I'm caught with you, *I* am the one who will be in trouble. You'd flit off to London and never think about me again."

"It won't happen," he claimed. "You will be front and center in my musings

for an eternity.”

His words were like a sweet candy that was too delicious to resist. They ignited her wanderlust, her yearning to escape the small life she'd accepted in order for Edna and Charlie to be safe.

She wanted to shuck off the restrictions that bound her, wanted to revel in every decadent pleasure he was offering. He was rich and amazing. Why not run away to London with him? Why not have him shower her with every depraved delight he could imagine?

The desire to make him happy, to make herself happy, was so powerful that she wasn't certain she could permit it to pass her by. She had to remember the duties that fettered her, had to remember who she was, where she was, what was allowed—and what wasn't.

“You should be at the manor with your friends,” she said. “You’ve tormented me plenty for one afternoon.”

“Don't be upset.”

“I'm not upset. When I'm with you, I crave things I can't have.”

“You could have them. You'd just have to be brave enough to reach out and grab them.”

“That's the problem for us. I'm not very brave.”

“Are you sure you want me to leave?”

“No, but I have to cease being stupid over you. I have to send you on your way.”

“I'll go without arguing—if you agree to come for the dancing tonight. I'm eager to have you saunter in in another beautiful gown that will have people gaping.”

“I believe I will come,” she fibbed.

“Promise me.”

“I promise.”

She would hide all evening, would blow out the candle and lock the door. Hopefully, he'd be busy, surrounded by fetching young ladies, and the event would end before he realized she hadn't arrived.

He kissed her a final time, and she joined in with much more enthusiasm than she should have displayed. They were standing by the windows, so apparently, she could feign moral inclinations, but she couldn't truly behave as was required.

“I'll see you tonight,” he said.

“I can't wait.”

“And I’ll tell Lord Drake and Mrs. Smithwaite to stay away.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it.”

He strolled off, and she watched as he vanished into the foliage, then she staggered over to a chair and eased down.

For a bit, she sat very still, her pulse slowing, her mood calming, then she picked up a sketching pad and drew several quick pictures of him from memory. They weren’t precise, but they were close enough, and over the next few days, she’d add details. Once he left, she would be anxious to recollect his attractive features and virile body.

He wasn’t a man any woman would ever want to forget.



“WILL HE SEDUCE HER?”

“Probably.” Holden smirked at Rowena. They were discussing Warwick and Miss Dobbs, and he said, “Are you jealous that he might?”

“Yes. I’ve been dangling on his hook for weeks, but he hardly notices me. What is her allure?”

“Well, let’s see . . .” He pretended to ponder. “She’s stunning, feisty, different, exotic. She’s brilliantly talented in a manner no female ever is.”

“Besides all that.” Rowena waved a hand, as if she could push away his list of complimentary descriptions. “What’s her appeal? I don’t understand what’s driving him.”

“Most likely, it’s that she’s not very interested in him, and Warwick has an ego as big as a house. He’d view that type of apathy as a challenge.”

“Is that where I’ve misread the situation? Should I act as if I can’t abide him? Might some bored posturing ignite his passions?”

“It might be worth a try. Nothing else has succeeded for you.”

She was an impertinent trollop who was reveling in the freedom widowhood had delivered. She was teasing paramours in every direction, and she had an open invitation to sneak into his bedchamber whenever she liked. She hadn’t yet dared though, so he wasn’t positive how much of her audacity was talk and how much was action.

“You like Warwick more than me,” he said, merely to needle her.

“I like you equally.”

They were walking in the garden, not keen to return to the manor. Mrs. Milton was providing constant entertainment, but most of it was dull and ordinary, so they were in no hurry to arrive.

They skirted a cottage, and he figured it was where Miss Dobbs resided. There was a young boy playing in the grass. He was six or so, with white-blond hair and Miss Dobbs’ same fascinating eyes.

He nudged Rowena and said, “Isn’t that the boy in the painting you liked?”

She studied the child, then nodded. “I’m sure it is.”

“He looks just like Miss Dobbs.”

Rowena’s brows raised to her hairline. “He certainly does. What do you suppose it means?”

“We shouldn’t speculate. As with any country family, the Miltons will have a thousand skeletons in their closet. We won’t gossip about what any of them might be.”

A woman poked her nose out the front door of the cottage and called for the boy to come inside. Holden pulled up short, an old memory suddenly niggling at him.

“I think I know her,” he murmured, more to himself than to Rowena.

“From where?”

“Years ago, I was in Scotland and attending another hunting party. I crossed paths with her. Actually, now that I reflect on it, Miss Dobbs was there too. So was . . .”

His voice trailed off, and Rowena scowled and asked, “So was . . . who?”

It had been a fleeting encounter. He’d been in his carriage, on a rural lane. The women had been standing in the road—and quarreling quite viciously. It was why he’d noticed them. He’d seen a sight he shouldn’t have seen, and he definitely wouldn’t explain what he’d witnessed to nosy, curious Rowena.

“It was no one important,” he said.

He ought to mention it to Warwick though, but he’d have to debate as to the ramifications of disclosure. It was the sort of fact about which a fellow didn’t want to be wrong.

Chapter Seven



WARWICK WALKED DOWN THE path to Wilhelmina's studio. He wedged himself in some bushes, so he could peek in the window. The place was dark, but there was a small room at the back that contained a bed and dresser. The door to that room was closed, but a light shone in a crack at the bottom.

He supposed she was there and hiding from him. He went around to the main door, and it was locked, but with a fierce jerk on the knob, he was able to step inside.

It was late, after midnight. Mrs. Milton's soiree had been tedious and long, and he'd staggered through it simply by watching for Wilhelmina to arrive. When it had dawned on him that she wasn't coming, he'd been incensed. He'd wanted to stomp over to confront her, but he hadn't dared. The party was much smaller than previous ones, so his departure would have been noticed.

Once the event had wrapped up, he'd retired to his bedchamber, but he'd sipped whiskey and stared out at her cottage. After the house had quieted, he'd snuck down the stairs and out a rear exit.

He'd had too much to drink, so it was highly likely he was making a horrid decision, but he couldn't go to sleep until he'd talked to her. Evidently, he was that infatuated.

His assessment that she was present was instantly proved right. She must have heard him blundering in, for she peered out from the back room and whispered, "What are you doing here?"

Sounding incredibly petulant, he whispered in reply, "You promised you'd come to supper, and I waited all evening."

"I lied. Sorry." She didn't look sorry.

He marched over to where she was glowering at him, and he slid an arm around her waist and carried her into the room. He dipped down and kissed her fiercely, being delighted to find that she leapt into the embrace. She might have been

exasperated to have him arrive, but she was glad about it too.

The narrow bed was behind them. He twirled them toward it, tossed her onto the mattress, and followed her down. His stretched out atop her, and through it all, he hadn't stopped kissing her.

They kept on for an eternity, and it was the sweetest encounter he'd ever had with a woman. It disturbed his equilibrium and overwhelmed his better sense, which he hadn't believed possible. Apparently, there were aspects of the male-female relationship that he hadn't understood.

The interval wasn't that chaste. They caressed and touched each other in many intimate ways, and the situation gradually heated to a temperature that was thrilling and dangerous. What was his intent? If they continued, they'd remove clothes and proceed to fornication.

Was that his plan? Was that the ending he'd envisioned from the start?

He was a libertine and a wastrel, but he recognized that there were limits that shouldn't be crossed, and he thought he'd reached one of them. If she'd been a trollop, he wouldn't have worried about the conclusion. But she wasn't a trollop, and he liked her so much.

In four days, he'd be gone and would never see her again. He wasn't such a scoundrel that he'd lift her skirt a few times, then slither to London with hardly a goodbye. Or would he?

As with his father and brothers, where carnal behavior was concerned, there was no predicting how he might act.

"I missed you," he said when he finally drew away.

"I missed you too, but not enough to have you tiptoe over in the middle of the night."

"Why are you still up?"

"I was thinking about you so furiously that I couldn't sleep."

"Ooh, I love having you obsess."

He shifted onto his side, and she shifted too so they were nose to nose.

"How was the party?" she asked.

"Dull. Boring. It was awful of you to leave me there by myself."

"Have you been socializing with Cassandra? Have you changed your mind about her?"

"There's not a chance of that."

"I hadn't grasped that I was a jealous person, but I guess I am. I'm practically

gleeful that you don't like her."

"She's not a bad choice—for some other fellow. She's not right for me though."

"Her mother will be absolutely bereft over your decision."

"What will Cassandra's opinion be?" he asked. "Will she be bereft?"

"Probably not. She's very set on herself, and she believes Blanche should have found her an aristocrat."

"I'm nearly that lofty." He huffed with feigned offense. "Why wouldn't I be good enough for her?"

"She's very impatient. If you inherit, it might be in the far distant future. She wants things to happen immediately. And what if you never inherited? Then she'd feel cheated."

"If she's so eager to marry a lord, why doesn't her mother snag one for her? She's quite an heiress, so she has the dowry for it."

"Her mother tried," she said, "but she didn't have any luck."

"Ah, now I understand. Poor Cassandra had to lower her standards and stoop down to my level."

"Her ego will likely never recover. How about *your* ego? Will you recover from the revelation that she's not that excited about you?"

"It could go either way," he said. "If I die from regret, will you mourn me?"

"For a day or two, yes, but after that, I'll have forgotten why I liked you in the first place."

"You are too, too cruel, Miss Dobbs."

She chuckled and snuggled closer, so their bodies were pressed together. He was so aroused that it was difficult to rein in his worst impulses. It was torture to desire her so desperately, but to have to pretend he was honorable.

"May I ask you a question?" he said.

"You can ask me a thousand questions, but I can't guarantee I'll answer any of them truthfully."

He swatted her on the bottom. "Your reply is precisely what I should have expected. You swore you'd come to supper, so I declare you a furtive, sneaky liar."

"I'm not a liar. I'm a woman of mystery. It's one of my many attributes that drive men mad with longing."

"Do you drive men mad?"

She sputtered out a laugh. "I was joking. I can't remember the last time I

talked to a bachelor, and I certainly can't remember the last time I flirted with one."

"How have you become such a fabricator? As to myself, I constantly dissemble, but you're a female. Aren't you supposed to be better than that?"

"I take after my father. Have you heard any of the stories about him?"

"Not many, no."

"He was spoiled and vain," she said. "When he saw something he wanted, he grabbed it without considering the consequences."

"That sounds like me, so I can't claim it's a negative character trait."

"He was also a dedicated Romeo, so when a Juliet tickled his fancy, he fell into an affair with her. He was never cautious, and he repeatedly got himself entangled with paramours he shouldn't have picked. He'd twist himself in knots, trying to hide his antics."

"I imagine he was an expert at deceit."

"He was a master at it," she said, "and I grew up watching him. Occasionally, I had to cover for him, when he was off causing trouble with the wrong wife or daughter."

"You must have had a very interesting childhood."

"That's putting it mildly."

"Did he teach you to paint? Did he have free minutes in between his amorous liaisons to show you how?"

"He wasn't exactly a doting parent. I was never allowed to interrupt when he was working, so I figured it out by hovering in the corner."

"You must have been a quick learner."

"I definitely was," she said.

"How did you wind up at Hill Haven? You told me earlier, but I can't recall the details."

"Blanche's husband, Harold, was my father's cousin and patron. He bailed us out of jams and even out of debtor's prison once."

"You were in debtor's prison with your father?"

"Only for a week—until Harold paid a few of our bills."

"Oh, my goodness."

"When we finally moved to Hill Haven, Father was at a low ebb, both with his health and his career. Blanche felt sorry for us and let us stay."

"I never heard how he died," he said. "Was it fast or was it slow and painful?"

"He had an accident shortly after we arrived. It killed him."

“Was his death hard on you? Were you close to him? From your comments, I can’t deduce if you were fond or not.”

“I was incredibly fond. He was amazing and fascinating, but I often hated him too. He engaged in such reckless behaviors, so we were never safe. I never knew—from one moment to the next—what might happen. It’s why I’m so concerned about protecting Edna and Charlie. I never want them to worry as I ceaselessly worried.”

“Your experiences with your father shaped you into quite a fascinating person.”

She scoffed. “Are you fascinated?”

“It’s more accurate to describe me as completely obsessed.”

“No man has ever been obsessed with me before, so I will proclaim myself to be extremely flattered.”

It was an intriguing remark. She was a fallen woman who’d birthed a son out of wedlock, so he was wondering once again about the fellow who had seduced her. Had she been forced? Or had she been young, naïve, and in love? Why would she have succumbed without heightened emotions being involved?

“How old were you when Charlie was born?”

“I’d just turned nineteen.”

“You’re . . . what? Twenty-five? I guess I can officially deem you a spinster.”

“I don’t mind being a spinster. After the mischief I witnessed from my father and his wicked friends, I can’t picture me ever marrying.”

He nearly said, *What if I proposed? What would your opinion be of matrimony then?*

The questions were so unusual that, when they popped into his head, he was glad he was lying down. If he hadn’t been, he might have collapsed from shock.

Marriage? To Wilhelmina Dobbs? The idea was preposterous, so what had generated it?

Apparently, his father’s nagging about securing the title and the line had had more of an effect on him than he’d realized, and he liked Wilhelmina more than he’d ever liked any woman. He barely knew her though, so his sense of elevated affection was ridiculous. Yet the notion of traveling to London without her was disturbing.

Why was that?

With their being deliciously snuggled, it was difficult to concentrate. He had to be careful, lest he utter promises he didn’t mean and couldn’t retract.

“You’re scowling,” she said. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong precisely. I’m simply trying to figure out my intentions toward you.”

“I’m trying to figure them out myself. I’ve made paltry attempts to discourage you, but they’ve been futile.”

“I’m eager for us to have an affair,” he said, “but it’s so unlike me to be infatuated.”

“You’re only smitten because I keep telling you *no*, and you can’t stand to be rejected.”

He grinned. “Maybe, and I’m departing soon. There wouldn’t be any point to an amour, but I won’t stop wishing for it to occur.”

She laid a palm on his cheek, then riffled her hand through his hair in a manner that thrilled him. It was an indication of fond acquaintance, as if they’d always been together, and he was starting to crave the small gestures she extended.

In his world, feminine displays of genuine sentiment were a rarity. There had been few women in his life who’d ever exhibited sincere tenderness. His mother had died when he was very young, and in his scant memories of her, she’d been the sort to shout and hit at the least provocation.

During his boyhood, he’d mostly been raised by male servants. The female ones who should have been kindly nannies, hadn’t been able to control him, so they’d given up and had refused to try.

Once he’d been sent to boarding school, he’d had male teachers. Then he’d joined the army, where he’d been commanded by stern, gruff male officers. It hadn’t been until he’d resigned from the military and had settled in London that he’d moved into a spot where he was surrounded by the opposite sex.

He was rich and handsome, so there were hordes of women who were interested and available, but they were trollops who were paid for their services. Any demonstrations of tenderness were bought with hard money.

The feelings she stirred were riveting, and he yearned to experience more of them.

“You make me smile,” she said, “even though you’re incredibly silly.”

“I am *not* silly. I am a manly man who is confident in my manliness.”

She chortled merrily, and they sighed with pleasure, then their conversation dwindled. His heart was aching, as if it had swelled and didn’t fit under his ribs. Words flooded to the tip of his tongue, words like *commitment* and *marriage*, and he was terrified to open his mouth and spew a stupid platitude, so he kissed her. He needed a

physical distraction, an anchor to the moment that would prevent him from speaking recklessly.

She kissed him back with the type of candid enthusiasm he hadn't realized he was missing in his romantic forays. It was delightful and welcome, and they continued forever, until his ardor rose to such a height that he was worried over how long he could restrain himself. He was anxious to forge ahead and damn the consequences.

Finally, he drew away, and as their lips parted, there was the sweetest lull in the air. It seemed to envelop them, to bind them with the perception that—even after he left her—they could never really be separated.

“What time do you suppose it is?” he asked.

“Three? Four? Dawn will break shortly.”

“I should return to the manor. I have to be up for the morning's hunt.”

“What will you kill?”

“I think it's to be ducks. Or perhaps a stag. I'm not sure.”

“It won't be a pretty little fox, will it? With the hounds chasing it?”

“No. It will be an animal Mrs. Milton can have her chef prepare for supper.”

“I don't want you to leave just yet,” she said, “and the fact that I would admit it is alarming to me.”

“I don't want to leave either, but I imagine I should. Every tick of the clock means the servants will be up soon and lighting the fires. I don't dare have any witnesses as I skulk in like the cad I am.”

“Will I see you tomorrow?”

“Would you like to see me? You keep tormenting me with your rejection of my advances. I'm confused over what you expect.”

She smirked. “You are comfortably snuggled on my bed, so you are in no position to claim I have rejected your advances.”

“Probably not, but I like complaining. I have to make you recognize how cruel you're being.”

“You're such a spoiled baby.”

“I know, but you're mad for me anyway, aren't you?”

He sat up, his hips balanced on the edge of the mattress, his feet on the floor. She loafed behind him, stretched out like a harem girl who'd just serviced her master, but they hadn't misbehaved too blatantly. He hadn't unbuttoned a single button.

“What is your opinion?” he asked. “Should I stop by tomorrow or not?”

“If you can furtively manage it, I might be thrilled to have you visit me.”

"I'm departing on Sunday."

"That doesn't sound very far away."

"I'd like to tarry with you as much as I can, but you don't seem interested."

"I'm interested," she said, "but I can't figure out how to accomplish it."

"We're already accomplishing it."

"Yes, but I don't understand where this is leading."

"Must it lead somewhere?"

She pondered, then shook her head. "I guess not."

He braced his palms on the mattress. "I can't predict when I'll be able to slink over again, but I will."

"I'm never anywhere else, so I'll be here."

He stared down at her, and the most powerful wave of affection rocked him. There was no reason for it to have transpired, and it had him totally befuddled.

"Will you be present to watch the hunters ride off?" he asked.

"No. I receive no joy from seeing a bunch of rich, pompous idiots gallop by on their expensive horses. It's annoying."

"Well, you told me, didn't you?"

"Have fun and don't hurt yourself."

"My body is cast from iron, and I'm ridiculously lucky. I'm never injured."

"I will hope that always remains true."

They smiled, poignant emotion swirling, then she said, "Go! Before I beg you to stay."

He stood and started off, but at the last second, he halted and glanced back. What would happen to them? What did he want to have happen? He could easily describe the more debauched choices, but there were others hovering just out of reach. Or maybe he was too much of a coward to notice them.

Without reflecting, he blurted out, "I could land myself in a load of trouble with you."

"I shall never let *trouble* occur between us."

He left and tiptoed across the garden. It was very dark, but he staggered to the manor without falling into a hole or tripping over a log.

He was so aroused from their lengthy, unsatisfying dalliance, and his phallus was aching, having been deprived of pleasure. It was practically crying for some relief.

From the verandah, he could see a candle glowing in a bedchamber window. It was Rowena Smithwaite's. Her room was down the hall from his. Was she still up?

Would she like a late-night visitor?

She'd been tempting him for weeks, and she was so wicked. Why had he avoided her? As opposed to Wilhelmina, with whom he'd part in a few days, Mrs. Smithwaite would be with him in town. He didn't have to worry about trifling with her, then immediately fleeing to another location.

Should he barge in? What would she think? And would it be too reckless to instigate a carnal tryst in Mrs. Milton's home?

If he fornicated with Rowena, he would certainly feel better, and as an added benefit, he'd discover if she was as decadent as the stories declared her to be.

For the second time in a matter of hours, he supposed he was making a stupid decision, but the first one—to sneak into Wilhelmina's studio—had turned out to be perfect. Why not try again?

He crept into the house and up the stairs, and he counted the doors until he arrived at hers. He pressed his ear to the wood and could hear someone inside. He knocked once, quietly, then he spun the knob and peeked in.

To his delight, she was standing in the middle of the floor, attired only in corset and drawers, her feet bare, her gorgeous auburn hair flowing down her back. On observing him, she didn't flinch. She simply raised a brow and motioned for him to enter.

He slipped in, and she came over and crushed her shapely torso to his. He could smell a flowery perfume and a strong odor of alcohol.

She whispered, "Why are you wandering about?"

"I couldn't sleep, so I was strolling in the garden. I saw a light in your window."

"Might I hope my sensual signals have finally pierced your thick armor?"

"Yes, I guess you can hope that."

Suddenly, Holden popped up from the dressing room. He was naked, with a towel around his waist.

"This is awkward," he said to Warwick.

"No, it's not!" Mrs. Smithwaite insisted. "I don't mind us having company."

"I didn't realize you were here," Warwick said to his friend.

"Obviously not."

"Sorry."

Mrs. Smithwaite purred like a contented kitten. "There's no need to be sorry. You can both stay. The three of us can have fun together or, if you'd rather, one of you

can watch.”

Warwick had wallowed in the demimonde for years, and he’d participated in all sorts of outrageous escapades, but they’d been initiated by renowned doxies, so it was shocking to have Mrs. Smithwaite pose the risqué suggestion.

Holden glared at Warwick and said, “I’m too old to share with you. If I was still twenty, I might be willing.”

“I wasn’t aware that you’d proceeded with her,” Warwick said.

“I haven’t *yet*. Would you skedaddle so I can get on with it?”

Warwick smirked. “Don’t be too noisy. I would hate for Mrs. Milton to wonder if there’s mischief occurring among the guests.”

“I will be silent as a statue,” Holden said. “Now go away.”

Mrs. Smithwaite clasped Warwick’s hand and linked their fingers. She looked like a coquette, like the worst tart who’d ever been born.

“You can stop by some other night,” she murmured, “when Holden is busy and I’ll be alone.”

“I’ll consider it.” Holden glowered impatiently, and Warwick said, “I apologize for interrupting. Enjoy yourselves.”

He went over and glanced out into the hall, then kept on to his own room. There was a liquor tray in the corner, and he poured himself a whiskey, then walked over and stared out at Wilhelmina’s cottage.

With his nearly giving in to Mrs. Smithwaite’s flirtatious hints, he was glad he’d been thwarted by Holden’s presence. He hadn’t really wanted to begin an affair with her, for he suspected it would be hard to end it. And in a weird way, he’d have felt as if he was cheating on Wilhelmina. It was a strange perception, but there it was.

He sipped his drink, recollecting every moment of his rendezvous in her studio. Then he laid down on the bed, not even bothering to disrobe or crawl under the blankets.

He gazed at the ceiling and thought of Wilhelmina, and when he dozed off, he was smiling.

Chapter Eight



CASSANDRA WAS SEATED AT a table on the verandah, drinking a lemon punch and staring out at the garden. The house was empty, the male guests not back yet. There was a hunting lodge on the estate, and they were there, having a late breakfast.

She hadn't accompanied them to the morning event, but news had filtered in that they'd shot dozens of ducks, so it would be ducks for supper.

She could have joined them, but she didn't like hunting. It was so boring. The guns were very heavy and loud, and the smoke made her gown and hair stink, which was never a benefit.

Her mother was cross over her refusal to attend, so Cassandra had already been furiously scolded, and it was only eleven o'clock. Blanche felt Cassandra should pretend to be whatever sort of woman Warwick Stone deemed her to be. If he liked hunting, *she* should claim she liked it too.

She wasn't that skilled of an actress though, and it was galling to endure a rebuke from her mother. Blanche still treated her as if she were ten, and Cassandra was so tired of her mother's moods and morals.

She had a flask of whiskey hidden in a pocket in her skirt. She'd had her maid add the furtive alteration to all of her dresses so she could always carry one. She was often anxious, and alcohol rounded the edges in a curative manner. She drew it out and poured a dollop into her punch, then she took a slow sip, savoring the sensation of liquor flowing into her veins. It instantly relaxed her.

She saw Wilhelmina walking toward her, and she waved. Wilhelmina hesitated, as if she'd run back to the cottage, but in the end, she continued on. On the outside, they acted as if they were fond, but on the inside, mutual loathing festered.

Wilhelmina climbed the stairs onto the verandah. A footman was dawdling in case Cassandra needed assistance, and he hurried over and pulled out a chair so Wilhelmina could sit down. He offered to fetch her a lemon punch too, but she

shooed him away.

“What are you doing out and about so early?” Cassandra asked her.

Wilhelmina didn't explain, but inquired instead, “How about you? Why are you up?”

Cassandra's cousin kept odd hours, frequently painting until dawn when the impulse struck her, so it was strange to have her prancing about. It was strange for Cassandra to be up too. Most nights, she reveled until dawn, but with acquaintances, and while she liked to complain about her mother, they nearly always had parties with guests to entertain her.

“I had to cheer on the gentlemen,” Cassandra said, “as they went off for their sunrise hunt. Mother insisted I come down.”

“Now that you mention it, it is very quiet. Are they still at the lake?”

“Yes, but I expect them to return shortly. We'll be having a duck feast for supper. You should put in an appearance.”

“I'll think about it.”

Cassandra liked to bluster forward as if they were friends, but Wilhelmina never let Cassandra ignore the issues that lay between them. As with Blanche, Cassandra couldn't convince her to forget the past.

“What brings you to the manor?” she asked.

“Your mother summoned me.”

Cassandra smirked. “Aren't you lucky? What does she want?”

“She probably intends to reprimand me for spending too much on artistic supplies this month.”

Blanche paid Wilhelmina a stipend that helped her support Edna Stewart and the boy. If she hadn't received the allowance and the cottage, her situation would be quite pathetic. Cassandra thought she should be more grateful.

“How are the nuptial machinations proceeding?” Wilhelmina asked. “I hear you're hosting the sons of two earls this week.”

“One of them, Lord Drake, is supposedly off-limits.”

“How awful for you.” Wilhelmina was always so accursedly sarcastic.

“The other, Warwick Stone, is available. His father is very eager for a match, so he's a viable prospect.”

“Is Mr. Stone interested? Has he given you any hints?”

“We're cordial, and he enjoys my company very much.”

“Well, then, I'm sure a ring will be slipped on your finger very soon.”

“You don’t sound as if you’d be glad for me,” Cassandra said.

“Believe me, Cousin, I couldn’t care less who you marry, and the possibility of you being a bride never causes me a minute of lost sleep.”

With that snotty comment deftly hurled, Wilhelmina stood and marched on into the house. Cassandra sighed with regret.

When they’d been little girls, she’d been in awe of Wilhelmina. Her cousin had visited occasionally, with her famous father, and she’d seemed so sophisticated, so fascinating. But the fantasy was never the same as the reality.

After Wilhelmina and her father had moved to Hill Haven, Cassandra had learned the hard way that they had nothing in common. While Wilhelmina was more beautiful and poised than Cassandra, Cassandra far surpassed her in social standing and positioning.

Cassandra would wed an important gentleman, likely Warwick Stone, and she’d live happily ever after with him in town. Wilhelmina would remain a spinster and would waste away in the country with no suitors and no purpose.

She’d keep Cassandra’s secrets though. Blanche bribed her to keep them and that fetter would muzzle her forever.



ROBERT BOSWELL WALKED AROUND the side of the manor and into the garden at Hill Haven. He hadn’t entered through the front door, being afraid he might bump into Blanche Milton. She didn’t mind him popping by in the evenings, when the mansion was full of people, but she wouldn’t like his lurking before noon.

To his great delight, Cassandra was on the verandah, and for once, she was by herself. He’d been hoping to stumble into this type of encounter. From how she’d over-imbibed the prior night, he was certain she’d be hungover, so her defenses would be lowered. He’d be able to dote on her and improve her condition without her mother watching and glowering.

He waited until she glanced in his direction, then he feigned surprise, as if he’d just noticed her. He smiled and headed over to sit with her. A footman was hovering, and he offered Robert a lemon punch, which Robert accepted. He had the fellow bring another for Cassandra, then the man slithered away, and Robert had her all to himself.

He pulled his chair much too close so their calves and feet were touching. At his boldness, her exasperation was clear, but she didn't shift away. She simply scowled and said, "If you were expecting the festivities to have started, you're here much sooner than you should be."

"I figured you wouldn't have gone hunting, so I'd catch you by yourself."

"You have to stop inventing reasons to be alone with me. I don't like it, and I've begged you to desist. Why won't you listen?"

"I'm positive you don't mean it."

"Is Mother aware that you've arrived? She'll be incensed."

"Your mother is the very last person who ever concerns me, and I can't deduce why you let her run your life."

Cassandra blew out a heavy breath. "She's my mother. Of course she's permitted to run my life."

"You can barely follow her rules, and her restrictions are suffocating you."

She shrugged. "I'll be free of her once I'm married and residing in London."

"What if she never picks a husband for you? Haven't you noted that no suitor is ever good enough for her? With how she's procrastinated, I'm beginning to suspect she doesn't really want you to wed. You're her only child. In my opinion, she's deliberately sabotaging your nuptial chances so you'll wind up staying at Hill Haven and tending her in her old age."

Cassandra shuddered with dread. "I would throw myself off a cliff before I'd do that."

"I could rescue you—immediately. Just say the word."

"Please don't badger me so early in the morning. I hate your nagging. Mother will never agree to your courting me, and I'm not about to elope with you."

"I'm merely trying to save you from your mother *and* from yourself."

"Robert!" she sharply said. "I'm sorry, but I don't like you. How often must I repeat myself?"

"You could grow to like me."

"No, I couldn't, and besides, I suddenly have a satisfactory suitor. I'm sure I'll receive a proposal at the end of the party."

His heart plummeted to his toes. "Is it Lord Drake? He could never love you."

"No, it's not him." She sighed as if he was being a pest. "If you must know, it's Mr. Stone."

Robert blanched with dismay. Warwick Stone was a handsome, dashing

scoundrel. He was tall and broad-shouldered, with golden-blond hair and a face so attractive it might have been painted on a church ceiling.

“Not Warwick Stone!” he practically wailed. “You can’t consider him. Have you any notion of the reputation of the men in his family?”

“What about them? The one pertinent thing Mother told me is that they’re very rich.”

“They’re notorious cads too. They keep mistresses and wallow with the most disgusting trollops in the demimonde. They’re famous for it. Could you bear to be shackled to a libertine?”

“His wealth is the sole detail that matters to me. It won’t bother me if he philanders. So long as he spoils me rotten, I won’t care what he does in his private hours.”

He wondered if she truly believed that. She was a virgin, but he wasn’t. When he’d been at university, he’d fornicated several times. There had been plenty of bawdy houses near the campus to entertain the students.

Because of her innocence, she couldn’t understand the physical nature of the carnal act. After she learned how foul it could be, would she still be so blasé about her husband copulating with doxies? He doubted it, but by then, it would be too late.

“What if you wed Mr. Stone,” he said, “and he doesn’t spoil you? What if he stashes you in the country and never lets you come to town? What if you protested his treatment, and he locked you in a nunnery? It happens constantly. What then?”

“Oh, Robert! I have such a headache, and you’re making it pound even harder. Why must we always argue? If you persist in harassing me, I shall go inside.”

She fumbled in the folds of her skirt and pulled out the flask she carried. *He* had given it to her and had advised her to fill it—when no servants were looking—by stealing small amounts from various liquor trays in the manor. Early on, after he’d realized her clandestine passion for alcohol, he’d swiftly comprehended it to be a method to slyly ingratiate himself. So far, his ploy was succeeding brilliantly.

She was planning to furtively splash a dollop into her punch, but he said, “I have Mother’s elixir. Would you like some of it instead? You’ll recuperate faster.”

“Yes, I would like that.”

She stuck the flask in her skirt, then he poured a hefty quantity of the elixir into her glass. He stirred it with his finger, then slid it over to her. She cradled it with both hands, as if it were a fragile egg that could break if she wasn’t cautious. Then she downed a long swig. With it being mixed with the punch, it had to have a horrendous

taste, but she didn't flinch. Her shoulders drooped as she visibly relaxed.

"I needed that. Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"It's the best remedy I've ever tried for when I'm feeling poorly." She extended her glass. "May I have some more? Would you mind?"

"You may have as much as you like. There's more where this came from."



"YOU SUMMONED ME, BLANCHE. What can I do for you?"

Blanche was seated at the desk in her office, and Wilhelmina plopped onto the chair across from her. Since they were at the rear of the house, she'd wandered in on her own, with no servant to escort her. Blanche liked to be in control of any situation, so she ignored her, her gaze focused on an account ledger, but Wilhelmina wasn't a woman who would let herself be ignored.

In that, she was just like her dastardly father. She'd inherited too many of his hideous traits. In a male, people deemed them eccentric or humorous. In a female, they simply seemed inappropriate and immodest.

Wilhelmina could be rude and testy, and she never listened to wise counsel. She always thought she was in the right. Blanche carried on in the exact same manner, so they constantly butted heads.

Blanche wished she had some authority over the blasted girl, but she wasn't her mother, her guardian, or even her friend. Short of kicking her out on the road, there weren't many ways by which to rein in her worst impulses.

Occasionally, Blanche considered evicting her, but she never followed through. She'd loved Wilhelmina's father, Jefferson, until she'd learned to hate him, so she couldn't find it in her heart to be awful to his daughter. She yearned for Wilhelmina to behave as Blanche expected, but in light of their history, it wasn't possible, and Blanche had to stop hoping for it.

She'd been reviewing a column of numbers, and she glanced up, as if surprised that Wilhelmina was in the room.

"I didn't hear you come in," she said.

"You heard me so don't be obnoxious. What do you want?"

Obviously, there was no reason to bother with small talk. "I've been thinking

about the boy.”

He was a vivid reminder of what she detested about her life. She rarely went into the garden, simply because he might be playing there. One of her greatest personal victories was her ability to pretend he'd never been born.

“What boy would that be?” Wilhelmina inquired. “If you're referring to Charlie, I would appreciate it if you would have the decency to call him by his name.”

Blanche wouldn't engage in that argument. She couldn't win it. “He's six.”

“Yes, he's six. So?”

“Next year, he'll be seven, so we should send him away to school.”

“I assume you mean *boarding* school?”

“Well, yes. That's what I mean.”

“You'd like to ship him off to reside with strangers—when he's seven? What is wrong with you?”

Blanche's cheeks heated. It was a fact of their convoluted existence that they couldn't discuss him without quarreling. “It's the proper age for him to go. Boys from the best families start at seven.”

“He's not from the *best* of families,” Wilhelmina caustically replied. “Isn't that what you've always told me? He's a Dobbs, so you don't get to have an opinion about his education or anything else.”

“I could obtain a court order and be appointed his guardian,” Blanche stupidly threatened. “You're not fit to be in charge of him, and there's no judge in the land that would rule for you over me. I would be able to implement the correct plans. Your father would like me to do that for you.”

“My dear, departed father didn't care about anyone but himself. He wouldn't care about Charlie, so don't act as if you're concerned for his welfare—or mine. It won't work. Will that be all?”

“I'm sorry to have upset you,” Blanche claimed, but Wilhelmina had an artist's temperament, so she flew off the handle with the least provocation. “I was simply clarifying that I'm older, richer, and more responsible than you. I'm in a better position to assess his condition. I can see what he needs when you, perhaps, cannot.”

“Nice try, Blanche, but you'll never convince me that you're suddenly interested in Charlie. I know you too well, and you have no secrets from me.”

Blanche sighed. “Must we always bicker?”

“If we bicker, it's because you say such idiotic things. You realize they'll anger me, yet you say them anyway, so I can only presume you like aggravating me. Now

then, I'm busy, and I should return to my studio."

Blanche's shoulders sagged with regret. She hadn't intended to fight. She was anxious to have the boy removed from the property prior to Cassandra contracting a marriage. They shouldn't have a little bastard running around the estate, when she'd soon have her own sons to run around there.

Blanche had been foolish to let Wilhelmina bring the child to Hill Haven, and if she'd been thinking more clearly, she'd have refused, but she hadn't been thinking clearly. At the time, her world had been falling apart, and she'd made mistakes.

She would fix them though. Before too long, Charlie Dobbs would cease to plague her.

In the interim, she hated to be at odds with Wilhelmina. It simply kept matters boiling. She extended an olive branch of sorts. "The duck hunt was very successful, so we're having a feast tonight. Why don't you come? Two of our young ladies had to leave early, so we could use another female at the table."

Wilhelmina dithered forever, fuming, eager to quarrel a bit more, but in the end, she nodded. "I wouldn't want your table to be uneven, so I will oblige you."

Blanche chuckled. "That wasn't so hard, was it?"

"It was like pulling teeth."

The accursed girl stood and sauntered out, and Blanche sat in her seat, feeling as if she'd been pummeled with a club. The air calmed, her rage cooled, then she rose and walked over to the window, spying on Wilhelmina as she stomped across the garden toward the cottage.

She'd been swallowed up by the hedges, when Blanche noticed Cassandra huddled on the verandah with a gentleman. Initially, she assumed it was Warwick Stone. They were pressed close, whispering animatedly, and she grinned with excitement—until it dawned on her that it wasn't Mr. Stone!

It was that annoying cur, Robert Boswell.

The pathetic dolt had once had the audacity to ask if he could court Cassandra, but Blanche had vehemently declined the request. His father was bankrupt, his mother reputed to be an opium addict, and Robert had been sent down from university because of a scandal so contemptable that no one would talk about it aloud.

Was he sneaking in to flirt with Cassandra and Blanche blind to his mischief? And what about Cassandra? The ridiculous tart knew she shouldn't encourage him!

Blanche whipped away and stormed out of the room. She would chase Mr. Boswell away, and if she had to summon a cadre of footmen to toss him out bodily, then that is precisely what she would do!



“HE’S ON A MARITAL scouting trip? Really?”

“Don’t look so surprised. You’re aware that I’d like the three of you to wed in a hurry.”

Neville Stone, Lord Swindon, glared at his son, Hunter, and Hunter glared back. Neville didn’t have the best relationship with his boys, but for the most part, they were polite and dutiful. They’d watch over him in his dotage. At least he told himself they would.

“Who is the girl,” Hunter demanded, “and how have you coerced him into meeting her?”

“I didn’t coerce him. Just as I didn’t coerce you. You wed quickly, and it worked out fine.”

“It worked out because I made my own choice. The candidate you found for me was a total nightmare. I had to scrounge around by myself, with no guidance or direction. I got lucky with Hannah. No thanks to you.”

Neville waved a hand. “The original betrothal I arranged was a minor misstep. You wound up happy and in love, so I fail to see why you continue to complain about how you arrived at such a fortunate ending.”

“I’m very fond of Warwick,” Hunter said. “Will he return to town and take you out to the woodshed?”

“I selected the perfect fiancée for him, from a very good family, so you needn’t worry.”

Hunter scoffed with derision. “Famous last words. Please tell me he’s simply deciding if he likes her. You better not have signed a contract.”

“I haven’t signed any documents. I’ve corresponded with the mother, and we both agreed it would be an ideal match.”

“That comment scares the hell out of me.”

“Why would it? Your brother is attending a country house party. If he proposes after it’s over, it’s up to him. I would never interfere.”

“Ha! You are the most obnoxious ass in the kingdom, and now that you’ve inherited, you’ve grown a thousand times more arrogant.”

“I’m an earl, Hunter. I’m supposed to be arrogant.”

They were at Neville’s estate of Stone Manor and seated in his library. A fire roared in the grate, and they were enjoying a late-afternoon brandy. It was the property he’d always owned, where his boys had been raised and he’d staggered through his two hideous marriages.

Because he’d been elevated to the title, the ostentatious estate of Swindon was his too, and it included the grand mansion of Swindon Hall, but he preferred Stone Manor and always would. It was home.

Recently, Neville had pressured Hannah Graves to wed Hunter. In light of her recalcitrance, Neville had had to intervene. She hadn’t been interested in being Hunter’s wife, but the poor oaf had been so pitifully besotted, and Neville was a romantic at heart. With Neville wearing her down, she hadn’t dared to refuse, so he had a very sweet, very pretty girl as his new daughter-in-law. And Hunter was walking on air.

“Who is eyeing Warwick?” Hunter asked. “Who is the family? Would I be acquainted with them?”

“The Miltons? Harold Milton? He’s been deceased for years, but his widow, Blanche, wrote about their daughter, Cassandra.”

“You know them . . . how?”

“Harold was a chum back in my glory days.” As a young man, Neville and his companions had cut a disgusting swath in London’s social circles. People still told stories about them. “Blanche is an old friend too.”

Hunter was no fool. “Meaning what? You had an affair with her?”

“Not an affair exactly. I try to steer clear of married ladies.”

“You’re telling me you fornicated with her a few times.”

Neville shrugged. “Perhaps more than a few.”

“I can’t figure out whether to gag or shudder. Does Warwick realize you’re hoping to shackle him to the daughter after you’ve had carnal knowledge of the mother?”

“It was decades ago, Hunter. Why would my intimate relations with Blanche have any bearing on what Warwick chooses?”

“You have the most exasperating justifications for your actions.”

“He has to wed, as you had to wed. If he likes Cassandra Milton, why

shouldn't he pick her?"

"Before you push him into this, I insist on being introduced to her. If she's the least bit horrid, I'll talk him out of it."

"Her mother assures me there's nothing wrong with her."

"Yes, well, she would say that—in order to snag Warwick. Is he at their estate now? Should I ride there to discover if he needs rescuing?"

"He doesn't need rescuing. He is free to propose or not."

"The very fact that he visited indicates their expectations have been raised. They'll be positive an engagement is about to occur."

Neville smirked. "They might get one or they might not."

"Why am I receiving the distinct impression that you have a scheme working?"

"Why would you automatically assume I'm plotting against your brother? I'm merely trying to help him marry. It's how any responsible father would proceed."

Hunter had just swallowed down a gulp of liquor, and Neville's remark made him choke and pound on his chest. "You've never been responsible a day in your life."

"Due to my concerted efforts, you glommed onto Hannah."

"By accident."

"Then we shall pray Warwick suffers an *accident* too. It seems to have concluded so well for you."

"I won her despite your devious intrigues, and before this conversation is finished, I must ask about Sheridan." Sheridan was Neville's youngest. "Have you stirred any pots for him? Will he arrive in England, only to have a strange girl waiting at the dock who will announce herself to be his betrothed?"

"Sheridan is still at sea. Once he's home, I'll speak to him and learn what kind of bride he'd like to have, and I'll start pondering. Have I mentioned I'm being absolutely besieged with letters from mothers about their fetching daughters?"

"What sane mother would contact you about any of us? It boggles the mind."

"A title renders a fellow much more eligible. When an earldom hangs in the balance, rational parents are willing to overlook many sins."

"I repeat: It boggles the mind."



“I DIDN’T GET TO hunt. All the men went, but I had to stay here.”

“You’re too small to hold a gun, and the bangs are very loud. It would have hurt your ears, so you wouldn’t have liked it.”

“Maybe when I’m bigger?”

“Maybe.”

Edna watched as Wilhelmina and Charlie chatted. It was fascinating to study them when they were together. They were both Dobbs, and their accursed bloodline meant they viewed themselves as superior to lesser mortals. Charlie already understood his preeminent spot in the world. What would become of him?

They were in Wilhelmina’s bedchamber, in their cottage, and she was seated at her dressing table and applying a hint of cosmetics to her face. She was attending supper at the manor, so she was garbed like a rich heiress. Her hair was curled, her gown pressed, her fan and shawl laid out on the mattress. She would depart shortly.

Mrs. Milton invited her to soirees, liking to act as if they were cordial. Wilhelmina obliged her occasionally, when she was bored or restless, but it was silly for her to go. She was never happy afterward and would rage for days about how she loathed the choices she’d made, but Wilhelmina was an adult, and she’d crammed herself into the box that was stifling her. It was a little late to complain.

They had safe lodging, that was free, and they could remain forever, so long as their spat with Mrs. Milton never escalated. It was Edna’s perpetual goal to prevent any escalation. She’d hitched her wagon to Jefferson and Wilhelmina Dobbs, but it had been a rough ride, and she was content at Hill Haven.

She didn’t intend to ever leave, and she wouldn’t let Wilhelmina imperil their security merely because she couldn’t control her temper.

“May I come to the party?” Charlie asked Wilhelmina.

“No. Children aren’t allowed.”

“Is that another thing I’ll have to wait to do when I’m bigger?”

“Yes.”

Edna interrupted. “Charlie, head to bed. I’ll get rid of Wilhelmina, then I’ll tuck you in.”

He ignored Edna; when Wilhelmina was present, his focus was on her. He flitted around her like a moth to a flame.

“Will you tell me about the party in the morning?” he said. “I want to hear all about it.”

“Yes, but why don’t you listen to Edna for once? Go to bed.”

"I'm not tired," he claimed even as he stifled a yawn.

He was six, but so stubborn and imperious, and Edna had no idea how they'd manage him when he was older. No doubt he'd be a virtual terror as Jefferson had been.

Wilhelmina was the only one who could coax him into behaving when he was irritable, and she motioned for him to leave. He marched out, but at the last second, he glanced back. "I should have a father, shouldn't I? He'd have taken me hunting with the men today. I spend all my time with women, and you never think of what I need."

"We think of you constantly," Wilhelmina said, "and we've turned you into a spoiled monster. Now *go* to bed!"

He bristled, but a firm glower from Wilhelmina urged him on his way. They carried until he was down the hall and his door closed. Then Edna asked, "How will we handle him as he grows up?"

"We'll deal with the problem when it arises."

"You always pretend there's no trouble festering."

"Should I fret continually like you? I don't see the point of worrying every single minute."

"What did Mrs. Milton want?"

Edna was nervous when Wilhelmina talked to the rude harpy. Mrs. Milton had placed herself in the role of benefactor to them, but she could be such a shrew. It wouldn't be surprising if, when they were totally unprepared, they were evicted without warning. Edna tiptoed on eggshells, terrified that conclusion could arrive at any moment.

To keep Charlie from eavesdropping, Wilhelmina leaned nearer and murmured, "Blanche has decided we should send him to boarding school next year."

"The witch!" Crudely, Edna added, "I hope you told her to bugger off."

"I did, and then, she felt guilty, so she invited me to supper."

"I wish you weren't going."

Wilhelmina shrugged. "It will be good for me, and besides, I plan to outrageously throw myself at Cassandra's intended."

"Who is her intended?"

"Warwick Stone. His father is Neville Stone, Lord Swindon."

Edna knew Lord Swindon. When she'd been younger and madly in love with Jefferson, she'd met many of his friends. Lord Swindon had been a handsome, profligate scoundrel who was reputed to have seduced a thousand women. Because of

his low morals and wicked disposition, he and Jefferson had gotten on famously.

"I didn't realize matters had progressed so far," Edna said.

"Blanche assumes he'll propose."

"Might he?"

"Not if I can help it."

Wilhelmina's sly tone frightened Edna very much. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm not thinking anything." The gleam in Wilhelmina's eye belied her words.

"He's fascinated by me, and I'm amazed to find myself quite fascinated by him. I can't possibly let him develop an interest in Cassandra, can I?"

She spun on the stool and stared up at Edna, daring her to provide the wrong answer, and Edna said, "If Mrs. Milton is pursuing Mr. Stone for Cassandra, you'd be deranged to interfere."

"People have always insisted I'm a lunatic. I am Jefferson Dobbs' daughter after all. Who would expect rational conduct from me?"

She stood, grabbed her fan and shawl, and sauntered out. Edna traipsed after her, her alarm spiraling. She'd already recognized she'd have to report Wilhelmina's infatuation to Mrs. Milton.

"Will you implement a calamity?" she asked. "Please don't."

"It's just a supper, Edna. Don't have an apoplexy."

"Have you been flirting with Mr. Stone?"

"*He* has been flirting with me," Wilhelmina baldly admitted, "and I've greatly enjoyed it too."

"How have you managed to dally with him? I haven't noticed him sneaking around."

"I have my studio. There's no reason for you to be apprised when I have a visitor."

"He's been with you there when you were alone?"

"I'm not a fussy debutante, so don't scold me."

Edna blanched. "Tell me you haven't disgraced yourself with him."

"I haven't."

Edna couldn't decide if that was true or not. "If he's about to engage himself to Cassandra, you can't meddle in that situation. Promise me you won't. If you wreck Cassandra's chance with him, and Mrs. Milton learns that you have, imagine the catastrophe that might ensue."

"Believe me, I've imagined it."

“You have to consider Charlie and me. You vowed—if I stayed and assisted you with him—that you’d always put us first.”

“And I always have.”

Edna studied her, feeling a sense of dread over how stunning she was, how elegantly she was dressed.

As they’d retired to Hill Haven, she’d brought trunks of gowns along with her. She had an expensive wardrobe, accumulated from when they’d resided in palaces and chateaux and had attended balls and other events where she’d had to carry on like a princess.

Her fantastic garments, coupled with her beauty and exotic flare, stopped conversation in a room when she entered it. Women hated her, and men lusted after her, but she passed by all of them like a goddess who was so high above them that they were invisible.

Warwick Stone would never be able to resist her, so what disaster was about to crash into them? Edna couldn’t bear to know.

“Don’t be rash,” Edna said. “Swear to me you won’t be.”

“I won’t swear,” Wilhelmina retorted, “but I will tell you this: I shall be just rash enough to contemplate trouble, but I won’t step over any lines that would send you to your fainting couch. How about that? Will that suffice?”

“You haven’t calmed my fears in the least.”

“Then I suppose you’ll have to pace until dawn and wonder what I’m up to.”

“You presume nothing bad will ever happen to you.”

“And you constantly presume devastation is about to sweep us away. You’re such a worrywart, and I never worry, so I can’t fathom why we’re still friends.”

“You need me.”

It was the one fact that bound them, and it was why Edna remained. The members of the Dobbs family were artists, were brilliant geniuses, who were awful at taking care of themselves, so Edna tried her best to make their lives easier. In exchange, they supported her. If she didn’t have them, what would she have?

“You’re correct,” Wilhelmina said. “I need you.”

She walked outside and was swallowed up by the dark night.

Edna watched her as she headed across the garden, but there was too much foliage blocking her view. She would have liked to utter a parting comment, to have the last word, but Wilhelmina never listened. She’d strut into Mrs. Milton’s dining room and flaunt herself into a tragedy. Who could guess what mess she’d foment?

From up on the landing, Charlie called, "Are you coming or not, Edna? You promised to tuck me in, and I've been waiting."

"Yes, I'm coming," she called back.

She shut the door and climbed the stairs.

Chapter Nine



“MISS DOBBS! WE MEET again.”

“Hello, Lord Drake. Are you enjoying the party?”

“I’m having a grand time,” Holden lied. He was bored and wishing he was in London, where he would be in three short days. He was kicking himself for agreeing to accompany Warwick.

Miss Dobbs was the most exquisite female he’d stumbled on in ages. She was attired in another spectacular lavender gown that enhanced the violet of her eyes and the blond of her hair. She had tiny purple flowers woven into the soft strands.

Her clothes were flawless. Her hair flawless. Her body and face flawless. Every item she’d chosen for her wardrobe was appropriate for the event, but she wore all of it in a manner that set her apart from everyone else.

They were standing on the verandah, having stepped out to cool down while the musicians rested and there was a break in the dancing. He’d wanted to partner with her, but it had been impossible to wedge himself into the line of gentlemen eager for the same privilege.

She’d actually attended supper for once, which had been a surprise. He’d been seated far down the table, so they hadn’t been able to chat, but he’d constantly been drawn to her. The ladies had stewed over the ruckus she’d generated, but the men had been delighted by it.

“Did you join in the hunt this morning?” she asked.

“Yes. I’m a lazy cur, but I can usually drag myself out of bed at dawn to shoot at animals. I will brazenly state that I revel in it.”

“Should I thank you for bringing home our meal? It was delicious.”

“Well, maybe you should thank Mrs. Milton’s chef. He was the one who whipped the food into edible shape. I didn’t have much to do with it.”

"You helped to supply the basis of the feast."

"I was hoping we could dance," he said, "but I couldn't get close enough to ask you."

"And I'm leaving in a few minutes, so I guess it's not meant to be."

"Why are you leaving? The festivities will continue for several more hours. Won't you tarry so I can have the opportunity?"

"You're sweet to request it, but my slippers have rubbed a blister on my heel. It's a sign that I've overstayed my welcome."

"If I don't see you before we depart on Sunday, I should reiterate my acquaintance with members of the Board at the Royal Exhibition. I'll inquire as to whether a woman can enter or not."

"They never could in the past," she said. "I've checked occasionally."

"Aren't we becoming a modern nation? Perhaps the dolts who run the blasted display have marched into the new century."

"I shall cross my fingers that you are correct."

"How would I apprise you of the response I receive? Can I drop you a note in care of Mrs. Milton? Would she deliver it to you?"

"That would be fine, and it's very gracious of you to think of me."

It was a pretty night, the stars out, and they stared at them together, the interval companionable. He wondered if Warwick had seduced her or if Warwick would mind if *he* made an attempt. From how Warwick had gazed at her when she'd arrived, Holden figured he ought to seek permission first.

Clearly, Warwick was feeling possessive.

His friend couldn't have had any idea of how blatant his interest had been. He couldn't hide it, and Mrs. Milton had likely noticed his heightened regard. When Warwick was at Hill Haven to assess a match with Cassandra Milton, he'd climbed out onto a very bad limb with Miss Dobbs. Holden would hate for her to suffer repercussions because of it.

"Could I ask you a question?" he said.

"Of course, but I can't promise I'll answer."

"I saw a little boy over by your cottage."

She stiffened. "Yes, it would have been Charlie."

"A woman called to him to come inside."

"It likely was my aunt, Edna Stewart. My mother passed away when I was a baby, and she raised me. Now she's assisting me with Charlie."

“Is Charlie your . . . son?”

“Yes.”

“Miss Stewart sounds very loyal.”

Miss Dobbs shrugged. “She can be loyal, but then, we’ve always supported her. If it’s purchased devotion, does it count?”

It was an odd comment, but he ignored it, focusing instead on the topic that had ignited his curiosity. “She looked familiar to me and so do you. By any chance, were the two of you in Scotland six or seven years ago? You were much younger then, but I’m positive it was you. Cassandra Milton was with you too. One afternoon, I could swear I rode by when you were walking down a country lane.”

She frowned at him forever, her thoughts whirring as she struggled with how to reply. He was certain—whatever she ultimately imparted—it would be a lie.

“I’ve never been to Scotland,” she claimed. “I traveled extensively in Europe with my father, but I’ve never traveled there.”

Obviously, she wouldn’t discuss what he had been eager to address, so he said, “I must have been mistaken.”

“Yes, you must have been.” She stepped away, ending the conversation. “Goodnight, Lord Drake. Enjoy the rest of your evening.”

“I will, Miss Dobbs. Hurry home and remove your slippers. I can’t bear to hear your feet are hurting.”

“I shall don my painting clothes and retire to my studio.”

“I expect you will spend the nocturnal hours creating a masterpiece.”

She smirked at that. “From your lips to God’s ears.”

She strolled down into the garden, and he observed her until she vanished in the foliage, then he sighed with aggravation.

He never liked to be drawn into gossip, but evidently, he would have to mention that fleeting encounter in Scotland to Warwick. Warwick insisted he wouldn’t propose to Miss Milton, and Holden needed to be sure.

Initially, when he’d seen Edna Stewart in the cottage, he’d told himself he was wrong or was misremembering. Except that he wasn’t wrong. He was convinced of it.

All those years ago, he’d had a brief glimpse of the three women. They’d been viciously quarreling, and their passionate dialog had left an impression. What had also left an impression was the fact that one of them had been very, very pregnant, and it hadn’t been Miss Dobbs.

Of that pesky detail, Holden wasn’t confused at all.



ROBERT BOSWELL LURKED IN the shadows, furtively following Cassandra as she headed toward the manor. She'd snuck out into the garden to chat with him, and she was very intoxicated, so he felt a duty to guarantee she arrived safely.

He shouldn't have offered her more of his mother's elixir, but he was angry over how he'd been treated earlier that morning by Mrs. Milton. She'd stumbled on him with Cassandra, and she'd chased him off—with instructions not to return.

His permanent invitation to her recurring parties had been revoked, and he was too infuriated for words. If he couldn't visit Hill Haven, what sort of entertainment would he have to enliven his dreary rural sojourn? And when would he socialize with Cassandra?

He'd coaxed her out for a hasty sip of elixir, and he'd added several drops of his mother's laudanum, but he shouldn't have increased the potency. She'd had quite a bit to drink prior to his showing up, and the enhanced effect would be conspicuous. No doubt he'd land her in trouble with Mrs. Milton.

He didn't regret it though. The more she and her mother fought, the easier it would be to persuade her to elope.

She reached a bend in the path and, without any warning, a gentleman appeared. They physically bumped into one another, and Cassandra was so off-balance that she nearly fell down. The fellow wrapped his arms around her to hold her upright so, suddenly, her body was pressed to his in a very inappropriate way.

"I've got you, Miss Milton," the man said.

"Aren't I lucky?" Cassandra responded. "Why haven't I been this close to you before? Don't you like me?"

"I like you just fine."

The meeting swiftly became dangerous for the man, and he frantically glanced about, looking for rescue, but also looking to discover if anyone was watching.

"You might have had too much wine with supper," the man said to her.

"I haven't had too much. I've had just enough."

"I should convey you into the house, but I'm not certain how."

"I don't want to go back. I'm having much more fun out here with you."

The man grumbled with frustration, and Robert rushed from his hiding spot.

As he approached, he recognized Lord Drake, and, as Robert blustered up, the snooty aristocrat blanched with alarm.

Robert was quick to adopt the role of savior. “I’ll deal with her, Lord Drake. Why don’t you head to the manor by yourself? I’ll take her in a side door and deliver her to her maid.”

“Thank you, sir. Boswell, isn’t it? I’m in your debt.”

“No debt was incurred, my lord. Cassandra and I are friends, and I can’t allow her to pitch you into a quagmire she didn’t intend.”

“How very generous of you. I’m grateful.”

Lord Drake practically threw Cassandra at Robert, then he vanished. Cassandra stared after him, her yearning so visible that Robert’s blood boiled.

“I wish I could marry him,” she said.

“You wouldn’t like him, Cassandra. He’s an ass. Everyone has told me that.”

She peered about, seeming bewildered. “I should return to the party, but I don’t know where it is.”

“Let’s walk to the servant’s stairs, and we’ll find your maid. She can put you to bed and invent some excuses for your mother.”

“That might be a good idea.”

“It is, my dear. I have your best interests at heart, and you shouldn’t ever forget it.”



WARWICK STEPPED OUT ONTO the verandah, and Rowena followed him out. Mrs. Milton never opened enough windows, so it was always too stuffy for Rowena’s liking. If he was irked that she’d tagged after him, she could truthfully claim she’d been suffocating.

He was in the shadows in the corner, leaned on the balustrade and clearly desiring to be somewhere besides Hill Haven. Well, they were leaving on Sunday, so his misery was nearly over.

Now that she’d finally shattered Holden’s defenses, her personal life would be a lot more intriguing. Her social standing would rise sharply too, but she couldn’t count on him. She had to constantly evaluate her options.

For weeks, she’d been dangling an affair at Warwick, and it was just her luck

that he'd snuck in at the very same moment Holden was there too. She was eager to encourage him to seek her out once they were in London. She was *always* available to a rich, handsome rogue like him.

He saw her coming, and she was delighted to receive a genuine smile. Apparently, she hadn't ruined things with him.

"I'm blatantly following you," she said. "I could have lied and pretended I was merely here for the fresh air, but you wouldn't have believed me."

"I'd rather have you join me than some of the other young ladies who are present."

She shifted so she was very close, her skirt swirling around his legs. They were alone, so she brazenly snuggled herself even closer. She was being incredibly forward, but as she'd learned in her prior dealings with him, decorum would get her nowhere.

"I feel awful about last night," she said.

"You shouldn't. Holden and I have been friends forever, and we've stumbled through our share of carnal mishaps. We'll survive."

"You have to promise you'll give me another chance."

He was noncommittal as always. "We'll see what happens when we're in town."

"Ooh, you are an annoying wretch. You're supposed to be drooling over me. Why aren't you?"

"I'm at this estate to ponder Miss Milton, so I should behave. I forgot myself for a while, but you and Holden were like having a bucket of cold water dumped on me. I shouldn't shame myself under Mrs. Milton's roof."

"After we're home, I hope you'll permit me to entertain you. I'm sure you'll like some of the activities I have in mind."

He snorted with amusement, and he gazed down at her so intently that she was positive he'd kiss her. He might have traveled to the country to court Miss Milton, but Rowena had no connection to the snotty girl and didn't care if she was betrayed. In fact, Rowena thought Warwick should run far and fast in the other direction, so if he was caught kissing Rowena on the patio, she would save him from himself.

He didn't proceed though, which was a great disappointment.

"Why don't you go inside?" he said. "We shouldn't be out here together."

"I'll tarry for a few minutes. It's really stuffy in the house. Would you like me to walk to the other end of the verandah so no one thinks we're chatting?"

"You don't have to move. Before you came out, I was planning to enjoy a

stroll, so I'll probably do that."

"I imagine it's futile to ask if I may accompany you."

"Yes, it's futile."

"I won't abandon my paltry efforts at seducing you," she said.

"You shouldn't abandon them. I'm humored by your valiant attempts."

"What would you bet? Will I succeed or not?"

"I'll let it be a surprise."

He slid away and went over to the stairs and down into the garden. She dawdled, expecting he'd peek back for a final glimpse of her, but the cur didn't look.

As she observed him, it was clear he wasn't aimlessly ambling, but was headed right for Miss Dobbs' studio.

He was thoroughly besotted with the gorgeous, exotic artist, and Rowena never liked to be pushed aside by another woman. She could understand why Warwick would be attracted to the strange creature, but if he decided to have an affair, he should march to Rowena's bedchamber and no place else.

She was certain Miss Dobbs was a gullible maiden who wouldn't recognize that Warwick had bad motives, so Rowena ought to enlighten her. If she was too naïve to protect herself, shouldn't she be warned to be cautious?

Rowena was adept at dispensing warnings to ninnies who needed them. Yes, she and Miss Dobbs had to have a long, pertinent talk about Warwick Stone.



WILHELMINA CREPT OUT OF the cottage. She'd returned from the party, and she'd tried to go to bed, but she couldn't rest. Blanche's soirees stirred her wanderlust, so sleep had been impossible.

When Blanche had offered lodging to Wilhelmina, she'd glommed onto it as if she'd been drowning. Why had she?

The answer to that question was easy. She was a coward who was too afraid to bluster out into the world and make her own way. It was simply so hard for a female to prosper. Her father had barely managed it, and he'd been male and brilliant.

She was riveted by memories of London, of Paris, of Vienna. She wanted to pack her bags and sail off to foreign lands, to rub elbows with princes who would beg her to paint them. She wanted the life her father had lived, but that opportunity had

never been available to her, and oh, how it galled!

After a brief stop in her bedroom, she'd shucked off her fine garments and had donned her trousers and smock instead. She'd tugged on her old boots and tiptoed out of the house.

The path to the studio was mostly shielded by hedges, but there were spots where she could see the manor. She halted and gazed at it, thinking it might have been a fairy palace. The chandeliers were glowing, and there were guests reveling in the various parlors.

She could have stayed at the party longer, but it was too difficult to conceal her interest in Warwick. She'd watched him constantly, and he'd watched her too. She couldn't guess if others had noticed their heightened regard, but it was mad to behave so recklessly.

Her yearning to dance with him had been so potent that she'd left. His presence changed too many of the dynamics in Blanche's home, and she shouldn't have attended the supper. It had been a stupid idea.

There was a couple snuggled together on the verandah, and as she studied them, she realized it was Warwick and Mrs. Smithwaite. She'd like to claim she was surprised, but she wasn't. Mrs. Smithwaite was the exact sort of slattern Wilhelmina envisioned Warwick dallying with in London—if she'd ever bothered to imagine it.

Were they lovers? Probably. When he slunk over to flirt with Wilhelmina, did he strut back to the manor and right into Mrs. Smithwaite's arms?

Wilhelmina tsked with regret. The perfidy of men never ceased to astonish her. Was she jealous? Was she hurt? Was she disgusted with herself?

Yes, on all counts.

She whipped away and continued on to her studio. She lit a lamp and a cheroot and poured herself a whiskey, then sat at the table, reviewing the sketches of Warwick she'd completed.

Her initial impulse was to start a fire and toss them in it, but she never deliberately destroyed her measly efforts. She wouldn't act like a spurned debutante merely because he had a beautiful paramour. She had no hold on him, and she would never grieve over him, despite how detestably he carried on.

A few minutes later, the door opened, and he snuck in. Before she could tamp down a reaction, her pulse pattered with excitement. What was wrong with her?

"You fled without telling me goodbye," he complained.

"I didn't think I should make a huge point of my departure. Nor did I think I

should single you out for a farewell.”

He sauntered over to her, looking virile, dashing, and too delicious for words.

“What are you working on?” he asked. The sketches were scattered across the table, and she didn’t try to hide them. He picked up the nearest one.

“You’re drawing me?” He appeared a tad stunned.

“I’d like to remember you after you’re gone, but I’m not certain it’s worth it to moon over you.”

“I like the notion of you mooning.”

He bent down and kissed her, and she joined in the embrace, but grudgingly. As he pulled away, he frowned.

“Are you upset with me? What have I done? Without even learning of my transgression, I most humbly apologize.”

She was never one to equivocate, so she answered honestly. “Is Mrs. Smithwaite your mistress?”

He didn’t flinch, didn’t blink. “No, and why would you inquire about her? What brought this on?”

“I was outside a bit ago, and I saw you snuggled with her on the verandah. You were awfully cordial.”

“I doubt you’ll believe me, but *she* was snuggled to me. I was just standing there.”

“You were a totally innocent victim?”

“On this occasion, yes.”

“Is she hoping to have an affair with you?”

“She’s hoping for it with every man she meets.”

“Will you oblige her?”

He shrugged. “I haven’t decided, but I guess it’s possible.”

It was the precise response she’d been expecting, but it wounded her. “I could have sworn she was involved with Lord Drake.”

“He grows bored easily, so whatever their mischief, it will end soon.”

“Then I suppose she’ll glom onto you.”

He chuckled. “Are you jealous? It sounds as if you are.”

“I can’t figure out what I am. In an odd way, I wish you were mine, so I could shout and throw things and weep at your feet.”

“Would you weep at my feet? I’m so vain that I might enjoy it.”

She scoffed with derision. “I’m sure you would.”

“We can solve this problem by you moving to London with me. *You* could be my mistress, then you wouldn’t have to worry about trollops like Rowena Smithwaite.”

“You mentioned that Lord Drake is easily bored. How about you? If I agreed to your indecent proposal, how long do you predict we’d keep on?”

“You’d likely tantalize me for weeks. Maybe even months.”

His tone was teasing, but underneath his comment, there was a blatant truth.

She was a tedious, spoiled woman, with annoying quirks and habits. She liked to pretend that she was tough and detached, but the reality was that she loved fiercely and forever, and she had a very tender heart. She would never let him break it.

She blew out the lamp, then she stood and nestled herself to him. His hips were leaned against the table, his legs stretched out, and she wedged herself between them. She initiated the first kiss, and he took over from there.

He held her as if she was precious and rare, and they continued for an eternity. When they drew apart, she sighed with gladness. She simply liked him more than she should, and he would be at Hill Haven for three more days. Actually, it was after midnight, so it was two more days. She had to devise a method to shield herself from suffering regrets after he left.

“You should go,” she murmured, her lips grazing his cheek, his nose, his chin.

“I want to stay with you all night.”

“You know you can’t.”

He huffed with feigned offense. “I know nothing of the sort.”

“Your presence at the party will have been missed, by Mrs. Milton especially.”

“I don’t care.”

“I do.”

She clasped his hand and led him out. He was reluctant to obey, but he trudged after her.

“There’s another hunt in the morning,” he said. “A final one. You won’t participate, will you? Or, at least, could you get up early to watch us ride out?”

“I never get up early.”

“Can I stop by afterward? The time is flying by, and Sunday is rushing toward me like a runaway carriage.”

“Yes, please come by. I could sketch you while you’re sitting in front of me.”

“I’ll be here the moment I can.”

“Don’t you dare kiss Mrs. Smithwaite later on,” she said. “I couldn’t bear to imagine it.”

“Trust me. I won’t be kissing the blasted tart. Lord Drake will keep her plenty busy.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“I can’t wait.”

They dawdled, grinning like halfwits, then she stepped away and shut the door. He didn’t tarry, as she’d assumed he might, but he spun away and marched off. She plopped down on the chair, and she loafed in the darkness, her mind filled with thoughts of him, as she tried to deduce her motives.

She didn’t believe his protestations of innocence regarding Mrs. Smithwaite, so why had she been so delighted to dally with him? Didn’t she have any pride? She always told herself she did, but apparently, she was mistaken about her true character. Where he was concerned, she was weak and feckless.

He was leaving on Sunday, the hours of their acquaintance waning fast, so his shameful conduct and low morals weren’t important. Until he departed, she would pretend he was hers and that he would never be anyone else’s.

Chapter Ten



WILHELMINA WAS IN HER studio, seated at her drawing table, when the door opened. She never had visitors, but since the current party had commenced earlier in the week, she'd been busy as a coaching inn.

The men were hunting, enjoying a last revel before the final supper that night. As far as she was aware, none of them were back yet, so it wouldn't be Warwick. She glanced over, braced to discover who had arrived and being sure she wouldn't be glad.

When she saw Mrs. Smithwaite, she sighed with exasperation. She'd been trying to sketch Warwick again, but never able to get his smile exactly right. She scooped up the pages and turned them face down.

She was fixated on Warwick like a besotted girl, and she didn't suppose she should let Mrs. Smithwaite know it. She seemed like the type of person who would use the information to Wilhelmina's disadvantage.

"Hello, Miss Dobbs," the beautiful, irksome woman said.

"Hello, Mrs. Smithwaite."

"You may call me Rowena if you like. May I call you Wilhelmina?"

Wilhelmina didn't reply to the question. "May I help you? What is it you need?"

"I was strolling in the garden, and I noticed you toiling away. You're so industrious! I just had to pop in and bid you good morning."

"Good morning to you too."

"Lord Drake plans to inquire about the Royal Exhibition for you. I can't imagine you'll be allowed to enter though. Isn't it infuriating to be a female?"

On that issue, she and Wilhelmina were in complete accord. "Yes, it's very infuriating."

Mrs. Smithwaite sauntered in, appearing pompous and bossy, as if she owned

the place and Wilhelmina was about to be evicted. She went over to the wall where canvases were stacked ten thick, and she snooped through them. The silence was uncomfortable, but Wilhelmina didn't break it. She simply watched the irritating shrew strut about.

She pulled out a small picture of Wilhelmina's cottage, one where roses were blooming along the front walk. It wasn't the greatest painting in history, but it was colorful and interesting.

"This is so pretty," Mrs. Smithwaite said. "I will be very brazen and ask if I may have it."

"No, sorry."

The woman clucked her tongue. "Won't you oblige me? I'd like to have one of your works in case—in the future—you become incredibly famous. Then I can claim I recognized from the start that you were brilliant."

"The chances of me being famous are slim to none. I'll just keep it for myself."

"It's so aggravating, isn't it, to be a woman? Doesn't the inequity drive you mad with rage?"

Evidently, Mrs. Smithwaite had a topic she was eager to address. Wilhelmina figured it would be Warwick. She couldn't deduce what other subject it could be. Nor could she fathom why they'd need to discuss him.

"I don't mean to be rude," Wilhelmina said, "but why are you here? What's on your mind?"

Pretending nonchalance, Mrs. Smithwaite wandered over and sat down. Without preamble, she said, "Are you in love with Warwick Stone?"

At the blunt query, Wilhelmina scoffed with derision. "I barely know Mr. Stone, and I have no idea why you'd pester me about him."

"I don't love him either—if you were wondering."

"I wasn't wondering. If the two of you are involved—or not involved—it has no bearing on me whatsoever."

Mrs. Smithwaite studied her, then frowned. "I've upset you."

"Yes, you have. I'm not a lady of leisure. I fill my hours with productive activity, and you've interrupted me."

"Could I tell you a few details about Warwick?"

"If you intend to impart horrid gossip, I can't listen."

"It's important for you to hear my comments. You're an innocent country Miss, and he's a dashing rogue from the city. He can be overwhelming, even to a

sophisticated woman like me, and I'm so afraid you might land yourself in a jam with him."

It was an outrageous remark, and Wilhelmina could have responded to several pieces of it, but what she picked was, "You think *I* am an innocent Miss?"

"Yes, so you'd be vulnerable to a libertine like him."

"I'll be sure to remember that. Will that be all?"

Mrs. Smithwaite's frown deepened. "You deem me frivolous and annoying, don't you? I understand why you'd view me as bothersome, but I'm trying to help you, to alert you as to what's really occurring between you and him."

"You seem to presume he and I have formed an attachment."

"Haven't you?"

"Despite what you suppose, I was raised around decadent, corrupt men like him. In fact, my father was very much like him. I don't fraternize with lazy wastrels from town. I'm not stupid or blind. He's bound to wed a ninny like my cousin, Cassandra, and I wish him happy."

Mrs. Smithwaite smirked. "It doesn't sound as if you believe your cousin would be a good bride for him."

"I have no opinion about it one way or another. As I already mentioned, I'm barely acquainted with Mr. Stone, and I can't guess what sort of bride he should have."

"I saw how he was looking at you last night."

"I talked to him precisely once, in the parlor before we headed in to supper. If you'd like to read a nefarious sign into that brief conversation, I can't stop you."

"I have to point out that if I noticed it, Mrs. Milton probably did too. You should be more cautious."

"Thank you for sharing that." Wilhelmina was being appallingly sarcastic. "I appreciate your concern."

"And you should avoid Warwick. He seduces every girl who crosses his path. His father and brothers are the same. The men of the Stone family are notorious for their immoral tendencies."

"Again, thank you for clarifying Mr. Stone's motives. If he should ever flirt with me, I will tell him what I learned about him, and he'll likely run away in terror."

Mrs. Smithwaite sighed as if Wilhelmina was being an ungrateful nuisance. "Well, I've supplied you with valuable advice. If you end up in a mess with him, don't say I didn't warn you."

"Rest assured, I will never say that."

The exasperating harpy stood and flounced out. What was it about rich people that made them act so superior? What made them speak to Wilhelmina and automatically assume they were better than she was?

What gall! Wilhelmina's father had been one of the most brilliant artists of the modern age, and she was possessed of all his cleverness and talent. How dare Mrs. Smithwaite—or anyone else, for that matter—feel free to lecture her!

She turned to her table and started drawing Warwick again, but the air was charged with such vitriol that she couldn't concentrate. Eventually, she tossed the pages aside and gave up.

It occurred to her that she was starving, and she rose and headed for the cottage. If she ate some food and chatted with Edna, perhaps she'd calm down. Edna didn't like wealthy snobs any more than Wilhelmina, so she'd hurl plenty of insults about the ridiculous woman's pomposity.

As she reached the door, a man walked out of the woods. She focused in and recognized Warwick. He appeared to have had an accident. The shoulder seam on his coat was torn, a trouser leg sporting a grass stain. He had a kerchief pressed to his cheek, and it was bloody. He was limping too.

"What happened to you?" she asked as she hurried over to check on his condition.

"Before I confess, you must promise not to laugh."

"I won't laugh. At least I don't think I will."

"I fell off my horse."

A smile twitched on her lips. "I haven't seen you ride, but I presume you're an experienced equestrian, so this must be incredibly humiliating."

"I *am* a skilled equestrian." Grouchily, as if she ought to know his biography, he added, "I was in the army for years."

"You were?"

"Yes, and for your information, I can ride like the wind. In my own defense, it was Mrs. Milton's animal, and it was skittish and ill-behaved all morning."

"Where is it now? You didn't shoot it in a blind rage, did you?"

"I was so irked that I left it with a groom and staggered back. I've had about all the *fun* I can abide for one day."

"You poor thing. How can I help you?"

"I need to sit down and catch my breath."

The manor was still quite a distance away, and he was dead on his feet. Her

lowly cottage was right next to them. Though she couldn't explain why, she didn't want to invite him into it. Probably, she was worried he'd discover how meager her existence was, but didn't he already realize it?

His view of her plight was irrelevant, and she waved to her door. "Will you come in? My Aunt Edna can nurse you. She always likes to fuss over a man."

"Why won't you fuss over me?"

"I've never fussed over a man in my life. I wouldn't have the faintest idea how."

"That I can believe." He sounded extremely churlish.

She led him inside. Edna was on the sofa in the front room. She glanced over her shoulder and called, "Wilhelmina, is that you?"

"Yes, Edna, and I've brought a guest."

Edna jumped up and whipped around. On observing Warwick's deteriorated state, she blanched with dismay. "My goodness, sir. You look wretched."

"I've been better." His mood was growing more glum by the minute.

Wilhelmina introduced them. "Mr. Stone, this is my aunt and companion, Miss Edna Stewart. She's been with my family for decades, and she practically raised me by herself."

"From how impertinent you are," he said, "it's clear she didn't have much of an effect on molding your character."

"I was born difficult," Wilhelmina retorted, then she turned to Edna. "Edna, this is Warwick Stone. I've mentioned him to you. He's here for Blanche's party. I found him lurching across the garden. He tumbled off his horse."

"Oh, my!" Edna said.

"He's very embarrassed, and we're not to tease him."

"The animal was being completely unreasonable," Warwick said.

Wilhelmina chortled at that. "He swears he's a skilled equestrian, but we didn't witness the incident, so we have to take his word for it."

She guided him into the dining room and eased him onto a chair. She plopped onto the one beside him, and they dawdled as Edna fluttered about. Their housemaid lugged in a pitcher of warm water and a bowl, and Edna washed his face and pressed a cloth to the cut on his cheek. It wasn't that bad or deep, but it had bled copiously.

Wilhelmina's contribution was to fetch a bottle of brandy from the kitchen and pour him a tall glass. He sipped it, shuddering with relief.

"My bones are aching," he said, "so I'll be miserable tomorrow."

"You're traveling to London, so you'll be bouncing in a carriage."

He winced. "Don't remind me."

Edna was dabbing at his shirt, trying to wipe out the blood droplets that had stained it. Ultimately, she gave up. "Your cravat might be beyond repair."

"I never liked that ratty old thing anyway," he told her.

"Is the hunt almost finished?" Wilhelmina asked. "Or is it still progressing? Will the other men be wondering where you are?"

"Several of them saw me fall, most especially Lord Drake, so I will never hear the end of it."

Wilhelmina chuckled and refilled his brandy. "You're such a spoiled brat; I can't imagine how you'll survive the shame."

Edna carried the bowl and pitcher to the kitchen. As she stepped out, he leaned in and stole a kiss. She shook a scolding finger at him, and as Edna returned, he flashed an innocent grin.

"Can I get you anything else, Mr. Stone?" Edna asked.

"I'm fine, Miss Stewart. Thank you."

"I hope you won't find me presumptuous, but I'm acquainted with your father."

"Really? When did you meet him? Please don't tell me a horrid story about the encounter. He has the worst reputation with the ladies."

"He was cordial with Wilhelmina's father. He's definitely a charming rogue."

"You are a master of understatement," Warwick said.

"Is he still a handsome, flirtatious devil?"

"He still is. He's fifty, but he hasn't slowed down or mended his ways. He doesn't think he should have to."

"Aren't all the men in your family cads?" Edna asked. "Are you just like him?"

Wilhelmina gasped. "Edna! Don't be rude!" She said to Warwick, "I apologize. I had no idea she'd be so indiscreet."

Warwick waved a hand. "It's all right. The fact that she'd blurt it out indicates she understands my father's faults very well indeed."

"Your notoriety precedes you," Wilhelmina said, "even in this tiny cottage in rural England, and I don't mean that as a compliment."

Suddenly, Charlie burst in and demanded, "Who is here? We have company and no one told me."

They had few visitors, so it was a rare event to have Warwick seated at their dining table. Charlie had never been shy, and even at age six, he was possessed of the Dobbs charisma and bluster.

“Do I know you?” he asked Warwick.

“Charlie,” Wilhelmina said, “this is a friend of mine. Mr. Stone.”

“Hello, Mr. Stone. Are you injured?”

“I fell and hit my head.”

“Does it hurt?”

“Yes, it hurts like the dickens. My shoulder and back don’t feel too grand either.”

“How did you fall?” Charlie asked.

“I was hunting, and my horse shied in the woods. I couldn’t stay in the saddle.”

“You were hunting? Will you teach me how someday? I live with women, and they never realize I should learn things like that.”

“You’d have to get bigger,” Warwick said, treating it as a serious inquiry, “but yes, I’d be happy to teach you once you are.”

Wilhelmina sighed. Charlie would badger her for months, for years. He never forgot a single detail, and he’d nag over when Warwick would arrive so the lessons could begin. She was exhausted just from pondering how adamant he’d be.

Warwick was studying Charlie, then studying her, then Charlie again, and she could practically read his mind. She was already bracing for the rash of questions he’d pose if he ever caught her alone again.

Edna dealt with Charlie by saying, “Charlie, let’s go upstairs so Mr. Stone can finish his brandy.”

“I want to chat a bit more,” Charlie replied. “He and I haven’t talked about any important topics.”

“He’ll stop by later,” Edna lied. “You can chat then.”

Charlie gazed at Warwick, his eyes probing. “Will you come back later? Do you promise?”

“Yes, I promise.” Warwick was lying too. He was leaving in the morning.

“Go!” Wilhelmina said to Charlie, and she pointed to the door.

He dithered, nearly refused, then marched out. Edna dogged his heels so he couldn’t run back in.

He was correct that he spent too much time around women, and he’d glom

onto Warwick, so she had to drag him out of the house. Warwick was very polite, and Charlie might trap him for hours, with Warwick being too kind to end his babbling, but Warwick needed a bath, some clean clothes, and more liquor to relax his muscles before they stiffened.

“Should I escort you to the manor?” she asked him. “Or can you make it on your own?”

“Am I being kicked out?”

“No, but if you tarry, Charlie will corner you, and you’ll never escape.”

“He’s an interesting boy.”

Warwick stared her down, eager for her to respond, but her face was blank.

Finally, he broke the silence. “Will you ever tell me about him?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I just . . . can’t.” She wished she could, but she was bound by oaths that were so heavy she’d been buried by them. She changed the subject. “You’re not marrying my cousin, Cassandra, are you?”

“No.”

“You’re positive? What if your father pressures you to proceed with her? Would you?”

“My father is too lazy to pressure me. Before I traveled here, he informed me that, if I pass on Miss Milton, he has dozens of other girls waiting in the wings.”

“You’re that popular?”

“Apparently, when your father inherits an earldom, mothers scurry out of the woodwork to regale him about their young, pretty daughters.”

She smirked. “The idea that you would fetter yourself to someone’s young, pretty daughter is very humorous to me.”

“There’s a reason I’ve never married.”

“What was it again? Aren’t you a dedicated scoundrel?”

“Yes, and if I ever relented and chose a bride, which I’m hoping to never do, it would have to be a female who fascinated me. Mothers can throw their daughters at me forever, but it doesn’t mean I have to be ensnared by one of them.”

“Perhaps you should stick with your trollops. They seem to be more your style.”

“I might have previously believed that was true, but *you* are not a trollop, and I’m quite smitten. I’m broadening my horizons.”

“Or maybe you’re bored in the country, and you’re trifling with me to fill the dreary hours.” She was certain that was it, but she wouldn’t allow him to validate her pathetic assessment. She stood and said, “Get up, you slacker. I’ll guide you over to the manor so your valet can return you to your usual dashing condition.”

“You think I’m dashing?”

“Yes, and I’m sure I’ve told you that before, so don’t be annoying.”

She grabbed his arm and yanked him to his feet. He obeyed grudgingly, then he leaned in and stole another kiss.

“Behave yourself,” she scolded, terrified that Edna or Charlie might bustle in and observe them.

She started out, her grip very firm, so he understood he shouldn’t dawdle. The entire interval was too awkward, and she simply wanted him gone.

He went with her, but slowly. He was scrutinizing her house, the furniture, lamps, and chairs, as if taking an inventory. She still owned many of her father’s paintings, and they hung on the walls. Several of them were of her doomed mother, but there were also many of Wilhelmina at various ages. Edna was even depicted in a few.

He paused to evaluate each one.

“Is that your mother?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“She was very fetching.”

“And too young and naïve to ever have wed my father. He drove her to an early grave with his vices and doxies. With his poverty too. At the beginning of their marriage, they were very poor. He was charming, and she shackled herself without comprehending how difficult it would be.”

“He was so famous later on. Didn’t you tell me his finances improved?”

“Yes, but he was a spendthrift. He could never hold onto a penny.”

She didn’t like to converse about Jefferson or her childhood. Those sorts of discussions set off her yearning, forcing her to recollect that her small life at Hill Haven was unbearable. She kept moving him toward the door, and finally, they reached it. She opened it and stepped outside. He hesitated, grinning at her, amused at his being tossed out, then he followed her. They walked across the garden.

“I’m so fascinated by you,” he said.

“So you’ve repeatedly claimed, and your fixation makes no sense.”

“I view you as being so odd and exotic, yet now, I’ve snooped in your home,

only to find that you live like a normal person.”

She laughed. “What were you expecting? That I’d camp in a ditch like a vagabond?”

“I wouldn’t have dared predict your circumstances.” Much too casually, he added, “Who was Charlie’s father?”

“I never talk about him.”

“Aren’t we friends? Why can’t you confide in me? I won’t judge you; I promise.”

She longed to unburden herself. She’d like to fall into his arms and reveal the secrets buried in her lonely heart. But she stayed where she was, maintaining a safe distance, being careful not to let a leg or hand brush his.

“Are you really his mother?” he inquired out of the blue.

“Why would you ask that?”

He shrugged. “You don’t seem very close to him.”

“I’m close enough, but I don’t have many maternal inclinations, so Edna tends him for me. I should have been born a man.”

“I’m glad you weren’t.”

Charlie, and her parenting, was another issue she wouldn’t debate, and she shifted them to a subject she probably shouldn’t raise. “I had a visitor in my studio a bit ago.”

“From your dour expression, I’m guessing I won’t like to hear who it was.”

“No, I don’t imagine you will. Mrs. Smithwaite felt compelled to stop by and inform me you are a renowned cad who is trying to seduce me against my will. She thinks I’m an innocent country Miss who doesn’t know her own mind and who could never fend off your dastardly advances.”

“Oh, my lord,” he muttered. “I’m stunned that she’d say that to you. I apologize.”

“I realize you insisted you’re not involved with her, but are you?”

“No. I’m barely acquainted with her, and I have no idea why she’d butt her nose into my private business.”

“She’s very jealous of me and warned me away from you.”

“I’ll speak to her.”

“You don’t have to. In fact, you shouldn’t mention it. It will simply confirm her suspicion that we’re dallying.”

“The good news is she’ll be gone tomorrow. She won’t be around to harass you

in the future.”

“Will you do me a favor once you’re back in town?”

“If I can.”

“Don’t ever philander with her. I couldn’t stand to ponder it.”

He chuckled. “Yes, my covetous little vixen, I swear my name will never be linked to hers.”

“Thank you.”

They’d arrived at the steps that would take him up onto the verandah and into the house. They dawdled, staring, smiling. She needed to depart, but they couldn’t separate themselves.

“There’s a final feast tonight,” he said. “Will you come to it?”

“I can’t. Blanche wouldn’t like it, and besides, Mrs. Smithwaite claimed our affection is entirely too visible.”

“That blasted woman! She has some audacity, doesn’t she?”

“Her assessment was correct though. We can’t be in the same room. We peer at each other too wistfully and people notice.”

“I will grudgingly agree that’s the case.” He sighed with regret. “I’m leaving in the morning. Early. I don’t suppose you’d stagger out to wave goodbye.”

“It’s a mad request, so *no*, I won’t be waving goodbye.”

“I could sneak over after everyone is abed. May I?”

“I’d like that.”

She should have refused, should have displayed better morals, but where he was concerned, she couldn’t behave.

He was gazing so fondly that, for a terrifying second, she thought he might kiss her. In the end, he didn’t. He merely reached out and furtively squeezed her hand, which was bad enough. Then he spun and climbed onto the verandah.

He was limping, and he leaned over the balustrade to say, “I ache all over. Do you feel sorry for me?”

“Definitely, you poor baby.”

“I’ll see you later,” he whispered, then he winked and sauntered away.

She stood like a forlorn statue, listening as he vanished. She would be with him that evening, for the very last time. But then . . .

She’d never be with him again. The notion was so distressing that she couldn’t contemplate it. She whipped away and proceeded to her studio, recognizing that hours of busy, frantic work would prevent her from weeping with dismay.



BLANCHE WAS IN HER office at the rear of the manor, and she glanced out the window. The sight that greeted her had her thinking she should stop glancing out. Previously, she'd stumbled on Cassandra with Mr. Boswell. Today, it was Wilhelmina with Warwick Stone.

She'd asked Edna Stewart if Mr. Stone had met Wilhelmina, and Edna had insisted he hadn't. Either Edna had been wrong or she'd lied. Edna was paid to spy on Wilhelmina. Blanche hadn't wrestled her to the ground and forced her to be disloyal. No, she'd eagerly consented.

Edna's role was to apprise Blanche of the goings-on in the cottage, to report any interesting tidbits that Blanche deserved to know. Didn't Blanche *deserve* to know Wilhelmina had formed an acquaintance with Mr. Stone?

There was no doubt romance had blossomed. It was so blatant Blanche could easily discern it, and her blood boiled.

They were a handsome couple, so young and attractive, and Mr. Stone was so intently focused on Wilhelmina that Blanche was positive he'd kiss her. Right there in the garden!

He wasn't that reckless though. He squeezed her hand, then came inside.

Blanche tarried for several minutes, fuming over the development. From what she'd just witnessed, she was fairly certain Mr. Stone wouldn't be proposing to Cassandra, but his father, Neville, was an old friend. Could Neville demand he follow through? Could Neville order it?

A father picked his son's bride, but Neville was such a scapegrace. How could she convince him that Cassandra would be the best choice for Warwick?

She swallowed down the bile that was gurgling in her belly, then she stomped out to locate the housekeeper. It was the final night of the party, so she didn't have time to deal with Edna or Wilhelmina, but she would deal with them.

Wilhelmina had agreed to the terms of her current situation. She would keep Cassandra's secrets, and she'd keep Blanche's too, so as to never interfere in Cassandra's marital search. By flirting with Mr. Stone, she'd violated every promise she'd ever made to them, and as with Edna, no one had forced Wilhelmina to assume the route she'd selected. She'd been glad to do it.

What should the penalty be for this most recent betrayal?

At the moment, Blanche was too angry to figure it out, but her guests would depart in the morning. Then she'd concentrate on Wilhelmina, and there would have to be consequences.

Chapter Eleven



“HAVE YOU ENJOYED YOUR visit?”

“Yes, very much. Hill Haven is beautiful.”

Warwick smiled at Cassandra, not wanting to look too annoyed. He'd like to tarry for the next month, to flirt and chat, but not with her. No, he'd like to misbehave with Wilhelmina, but since that prospect couldn't occur, he was simply keen to return to London as swiftly as possible.

“How is your head?” Cassandra asked.

“Aching.”

“The cut on your cheek is very dashing. You could be a pirate who's been in a battle.”

“It wasn't much of a battle, I'm afraid. My horse bolted, and I lost my seat before I could regain my balance.”

“I hate that you were injured,” she said, oozing false sympathy.

“I suspect I'll survive.”

“You seem to be limping.”

“Yes. I landed very hard, so there will be no dancing for me this evening.”

“Oh, I'm so disappointed to hear it! I was hoping we would have a final chance to promenade across the floor.”

“I doubt I could hobble fast enough to keep up with you.”

Supper was over, and it had been a grand feast, but Wilhelmina hadn't been present, so the entire event had been exasperating. He was astonished by how completely he'd become attached to her. Why had he? His obsession made no sense.

Once he was home, he wondered how long it would take for his infatuation to fade. He might mope for weeks or months, and the notion was too humiliating to consider.

“What time are you leaving in the morning?”

Cassandra's question yanked his focus back to her. The house was hot and stuffy, and she'd suggested they walk in the garden. He could have shambled after her, but he'd used discomfort as a reason to remain inside.

He'd journeyed to the property to assess her with an eye toward matrimony, and it was his last night at the estate. If he was intending to propose, it would have to happen shortly. By her mentioning a private stroll, she'd been offering him a spot to accomplish it.

Evidently, he was too much of a coward to tell her to her face that he wouldn't marry her. Instead, he'd protected himself by sitting in the cardroom and watching people gamble for pennies. They were surrounded by guests, so they were prevented from engaging in an intimate conversation.

"We're departing early," he answered. "Probably by seven, if I can get Lord Drake and Mrs. Smithwaite out of bed by then."

"You're so lucky you reside in town. Do you love it?"

"Yes. I grew up in the country with my brothers, then I enlisted in the army and traveled the world for a few years. After I returned to England, I stayed in the city. A rural existence doesn't hold much appeal to me."

"I totally understand. I'm ready to move to town myself." She sighed with a great deal of yearning. "I wish I could accompany you tomorrow."

It was a brazen comment that startled him. She was hinting that she could flee immediately, if he'd just invite her.

She recognized that it had been a brash remark, and she leaned over and rested a hand on his arm. "I sounded terribly forward, didn't I? I'm merely explaining that I'd like to live in London. Mother has a house in Mayfair, but we rarely open it."

"That's too bad," he said noncommittally.

"She hosts constant parties, but it's tedious to revel with the same neighbors over and over."

"The situation isn't much different in the city. I carouse with the same friends, and it's a tight social circle."

"But you have the theater and musicales. There are balls and lectures and museums to tour. At Hill Haven, I only have these evening soirees."

"They're very entertaining," he lied. "I've had a marvelous time."

With her talking about London, it was clear she was anxious for him to comprehend she could join him there. As his bride perhaps?

He could smell alcohol on her breath, and Holden had described a prior

incident where he'd bumped into her in the garden. She'd been so inebriated that she was staggering and slurring her words. Did she have a drinking problem? If so, it was carefully hidden, but what sane man would want a wife who was a drunkard?

"Would you excuse me?" he asked. "The servants are passing by with wine, but I'd like a stronger beverage. My body is throbbing from my accident, and I'd prefer a stout whiskey."

"Don't go!" she said a tad frantically. "I . . . ah . . . mean I hate to have you stumbling around on your sore ankle. We can have a footman fetch it."

"It's helpful for me to walk about. It will keep my muscles from stiffening."

He flashed a wan smile, then stood and limped away. He left the cardroom, thinking he'd plead fatigue and retire to his bedchamber. He would wait for the festivities to end, then he'd sneak over to Wilhelmina.

He'd told his father that he'd ponder a swift marriage, and suddenly, it dawned on him that he could pick Wilhelmina. Why not? What was stopping him?

Yet as fast as the idea arose, he shoved it away. He couldn't shackle himself to the flamboyant, peculiar daughter of a mad artist. She had no dowry and no ancestry worth declaring, and she was an unwed mother besides.

If he ever yielded to his father's nagging, he would select an appropriate girl, one who would please his father and who would carry on properly in his elevated world. Wilhelmina—with her surly attitude, vices, and passion for art—was the very last female he would choose.

It was a shame, really. He supposed, if he could convince himself to proceed with her, he'd never have a dull moment. Then again, she might exhaust him with her habits and quirks. That would be the more likely conclusion.

It was amusing to consider having her as his wife though, and as he went down the hall toward the foyer, he was grinning, trying to envision the extraordinary life they might have had together.

Just as he reached the stairs, Mrs. Milton appeared, and in light of her timing, he figured she'd been watching for him. He could barely conceal a wince of aggravation. He truly couldn't bear to speak with her.

"Mr. Stone," she said, "how are you feeling?"

"I'm fine. A bit banged up, but fine. I might make an early night of it."

"Could we chat first?"

She was standing next to her library. She gestured inside, giving him no opportunity to decline. He could have been an ass and continued on up the stairs, but

he wouldn't be that rude.

He hobbled over and entered the room. She followed him in and seated herself at the desk, motioning to a chair she'd placed across from her, and he eased down. A fire burned in the grate, and there was a liquor tray prominently displayed, so he was correct that she'd planned to intercept him.

"Will you have a whiskey?" she asked.

"Yes, if you don't mind."

She poured him a full glass, then sat back. She wasn't inclined to waste energy on small talk. "How was your sojourn with us? I hope our hospitality was acceptable."

"It was lovely. Thank you for inviting me *and* for welcoming Lord Drake and Mrs. Smithwaite. I appreciate being able to bring my friends."

She snorted derisively. "While you were in my home, your father demanded I not mention matrimony, but we're both aware of why you visited us."

"Yes, I know why I was here."

"What is your opinion of Cassandra?"

"She's very sweet."

"High praise indeed." She smirked. "Will you be proposing? From your bland expression, I'm assuming you won't be."

"No, I won't be."

"May I have an explanation as to why?"

"She's too young for me."

Mrs. Milton scowled. "She's twenty-three."

"Perhaps I should say she's too immature."

It was an awful word, and Mrs. Milton huffed with offense. "She's been educated and trained to her duties as a wife. She's pretty and well-mannered. Why would you call her immature?"

"I shouldn't have used that description. I'm a sophisticated gentleman, and she's not the type of girl I would have as my bride. She wouldn't fit by my side."

"She would fit," Mrs. Milton vehemently claimed. "She'd be perfect for you."

Her tone was heated, and it looked as if he was about to be admonished, but he wouldn't be chastised.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but she's not a suitable candidate."

"Your father thinks she is."

"My father has never met her."

Her dour disposition had him glad he'd rejected a betrothal. Who would want

to have such an angry, volatile harpy as a mother-in-law?

"Are you sure?" she asked, reining herself in.

"I'm very sure."

"Cassandra will be disappointed."

"I doubt that very much. She's spirited and feisty, and I can be a very stuffy person. I'm positive, after she reflects, she'll realize she'd be happier with someone else."

Mrs. Milton glared at him, struggling to devise a comment that would prove him wrong, but she recognized his decision couldn't be altered.

"I'll apprise Cassandra," she grimly muttered.

"I'd be obliged if you would. I haven't a clue how to manage it."

"There is another topic I must address though."

"Please swear we won't quarrel. You're furious, and this is a very awkward discussion. I'd like us to part on cordial terms."

"I saw you in the garden this afternoon."

"Yes, I walked to the manor after my accident."

"You were with Wilhelmina."

He froze, curious as to where the remark would lead them, then he said, "Yes, she noticed my battered condition and was anxious to guarantee I made it to the manor safe and sound."

"I saw you *together*." She was very accusatory.

"Yes, so?"

"You're so fond of her that you squeezed her hand in goodbye."

"Oh." His cheeks reddened, but he offered nothing more. He wasn't a child, and he wouldn't be reprimanded as if he was.

"She's exotic and beautiful," Mrs. Milton said. "Men are always fascinated by her."

"I can certainly understand why."

"You're not interested in Cassandra. Why is that precisely? I can only suspect that Wilhelmina interfered, so I will pose a direct question, and I expect a truthful answer: Have you disgraced yourself with her while you were residing under my roof?"

"No. I've been to her studio, and I'm amazed by her talent. We're friendly, that's all."

"Don't lie to me. You're more than friendly."

He shrugged, but didn't reply. He wasn't about to explain himself to her.

“There is a secret you should know about her,” she said, and she bluntly declared, “She’s a fallen woman. Are you aware of that fact?”

“Yes, your daughter spread the gossip.”

“She has constant affairs. You’re not her first paramour, and you won’t be her last. She can’t help herself. It’s the reason I don’t permit her to attend many of my parties. She doesn’t deliberately try to be enticing, but men desire her. They can’t resist.”

“Are you warning me away from her?”

“I’m simply informing you that you shouldn’t ever slink back to Hill Haven. Wilhelmina attracts lovers like flies, and once you depart tomorrow, you should depart forever. Don’t let me catch you sniffing around her. I’m afraid I have to insist you stay away.”

His temper flared, and he had to take several deep breaths so he didn’t commence a verbal tongue-lashing.

He was a very vain man, from a family of vain men, many of whom had ruled in England for centuries. He never allowed himself to be scolded, and he especially wouldn’t be scolded by a woman. But she was upset about Cassandra. It had to have been a huge blow, so he didn’t deliver the tirade she deserved.

“I have no intention of marrying your daughter,” he said, “so I won’t ever return. Are we finished? May we consider this dreadful conversation to be ended?”

“Yes, it’s ended.”

“Then I bid you goodnight and goodbye. I’ll leave shortly after dawn. Don’t bother coming down to see me off.”

He stood and marched out.



WILHELMINA JUMPED TO CONSCIOUSNESS and raised up on an elbow. She was in her studio, napping on the narrow bed. She’d worked for hours, but had been too distracted to concentrate. With every little noise, she’d figured it would be Warwick arriving, but it had never been him.

The stress and anticipation had finally exhausted her, and she’d dozed off, but here he was, standing in the doorway, silhouetted in the moonlight.

“Are you awake?” he asked.

“I am now.”

She smiled and extended a hand to him. He clasped hold, and she dragged him onto the lumpy mattress. They tumbled into a passionate kiss. He was stretched out atop her, his delicious, masculine body pressing her down. His hard phallus was flexing against her, so he was aroused in a manly manner.

The realization tickled her innards so she wanted to behave recklessly, to get herself into even more trouble with him than she already was. She needed to slow them down, but the problem for her was that he might be able to lure her into any dissolute conduct.

In the morning, after he disappeared, she'd rue and regret, but at the moment, she was fine with what was occurring. It was dark, and they were alone, and she was tempted to please him in any fashion he requested. It was no mystery what he might demand, and she couldn't deduce how she'd refuse.

Gradually, they stopped, and he slid onto his side. She rolled too, so they were nose to nose. They were touching, nibbling, whispering endearments.

“Come to London with me,” he said.

At the wicked entreaty, she yearned to cast caution to the wind and damn the consequences, but that was her father's voice urging her on. If she went with Warwick, if he coaxed her into it, what would she have left after he was through with her?

Nothing . . .

A woman's lot could collapse very fast when she sold herself for a few baubles. Currently, she was safe. Edna and Charlie had a roof over their heads. Could she be irresponsible and yank it away from them?

No, she could not. She couldn't heed her father's depraved murmuring. She couldn't allow her blood to stir, her cravings to escalate. There were always limits. She recognized what they were, and she had to let them box her in. Otherwise, there was no predicting what might happen.

“I can't come with you,” she replied.

“Can you bear to never see me again?”

“I'll find a way to bear it.”

“I can't visit you in the future.”

She thought he could if he really wanted to, but she said, “I know.”

“Mrs. Milton told me—since I'm not interested in Cassandra—I'm not welcome to return. If she hadn't been so adamant, I might have devised some excuses to slither in, but with her putting her foot down, I just can't.”

"It's all right. I never expected you to return."

"I'm worried about you," he said.

"Don't be. My life is quiet, small, and uneventful. I arranged it so no bad incidents will ever transpire. When my father was alive, I suffered through too many chaotic escapades, so I try to ensure that each day is the same as the previous one."

"I don't mean that I'm worried about your routine existence. I mean about your being here with Mrs. Milton. She spewed the most horrendous gossip, and I'm afraid for you."

"Why would she denigrate me? I can't fathom why the two of you were even discussing me."

"She saw us this afternoon in the garden. She accused me of being besotted."

She chuckled. "Aren't you?"

"Of course I am, and I can't hide it. She cornered me and nagged about whether I'd marry Cassandra or not, and when I admitted I wouldn't, she grew angry and blamed *you* for changing my mind."

"Oh."

"She claimed you regularly have affairs with strange men. That's the sort of lies she hurled."

"I'm glad you realized they were lies."

"I'm so incensed on your behalf."

She sighed with resignation. Her relationship with Blanche was fraught with pitfalls and danger. She should never have relied on Blanche for her security, but when she had, she'd been young and foolish, and her world had collapsed. She'd made so many awful choices, and they never ceased to pummel her.

"I insisted it wasn't because of you," he said, "but she didn't believe me. I'd like to wring her bloody neck."

"My champion," she said, being inordinately charmed.

"Would she kick you out over this? Or might she punish you in some other fashion?"

"No. Blanche and I are joined at the hip, and we don't have a sword sharp enough to cut us apart. There isn't a penalty she could impose. Not one that would have much of an effect anyway."

He blew out a heavy breath. "I hope you're correct, but I'm so concerned that you're not."

She studied him, weighing her loyalties, weighing ramifications, weighing

right and wrong. If she spilled her burden, she'd be opening a can of worms, but she was so intimately attached to him. She supposed he would keep her secrets—if she asked him to.

Then again, he was a cad. Could he be trusted? If he tendered a promise, was there any chance it would be sincerely given?

She decided to toss the dice and discover where they landed.

"I'd like to tell you a shocking story," she said, "but you have to swear you'll never repeat a word of it to another soul."

"I won't; I swear." The room was dark, with a hint of moonlight shining in, but he could read her solemn expression. "Is it about Charlie?" he asked. "Is it about the man who ruined you?"

"Before I answer, you have to swear about something else too. You have to *swear* you won't marry Cassandra, and you have to mean it."

"That's the easiest vow ever: I will never marry Cassandra Milton. I swear."

She studied him again, her fears rising up, but she tamped them down. Wouldn't it be a relief to confide in someone? If she confessed, wouldn't she feel better, freer, happier?

"I'm not Charlie's mother," she admitted.

He gasped. "You're not? Who is?"

"Cassandra."

He froze, processing the information, then he said, "Who is his father?"

"*My* father, Jefferson Dobbs."

His jaw dropped in surprise, and he sat up, braced on the pillow. "If Cassandra is his mother, and Jefferson Dobbs is his father, how in the hell did you end up as a fallen woman with a bastard child? Can you even begin to explain the situation to me?"

She scooted up too, so her back was braced on the wall. They were holding hands, and she would have liked to light a candle, so she could watch his eyes as she talked. She felt terribly guilty about the debacle, and even though none of it had been her fault, it seemed as if *she* had committed all the sins.

"My father was a libertine," she said. "We were in Italy, and he got himself into trouble with a duke's daughter. We fled the country in the middle of the night."

"How old were you?"

"I was eighteen that year. We were broke and dispirited, and eventually, we staggered to England, then Hill Haven. Blanche was in love with my father, and she

offered us our cottage. My father pretended to settle down, but he could never behave, so I knew it would be temporary.”

“What happened?”

“What do you think? Cassandra was home from school. She was pretty, feisty, and flirtatious. He seduced her.”

“Just once? Or was it more involved than that?”

“It was quite a passionate amour, one that lasted several months.”

“Did you have any idea?”

“I thought he was dallying with Blanche. Maybe he wasn’t or maybe he was fornicating with both of them. I never learned the truth.”

He scoffed with disgust. “Gad, I can’t bear to picture it.”

“He died in an accident. He tripped and tumbled down an embankment.”

“Let me guess. He perished suddenly, then Cassandra found out she was increasing.”

“Yes, and Blanche was livid. We fought for weeks, then finally, we agreed that Edna and I would travel to Scotland with Cassandra for her lying in. Blanche has a rural property there, and we hid ourselves away.”

He scowled. “You still haven’t clarified how *you* became an unwed mother.”

“Blanche was planning to put Charlie in an orphanage. At least, that’s what she claimed. For all I know, she might have simply drowned him in a stream and buried him in the woods. I was reeling from my father’s death, and Charlie was a tiny piece of him that I could have forever. I begged Blanche to allow me to keep him.”

“He’s Mrs. Milton’s grandson and *your* half-brother. Not your son. Your brother.”

“Yes. We quarreled viciously about it, and she relented so I could bring him to Hill Haven, but we entered into a Devil’s bargain. People believe Cassandra accompanied *me* to Scotland—rather than the other way around. I had to promise I would accept the blame and never breathe a word to anyone.”

“In exchange, you get the cottage. You get lodging for him and Edna.”

“Yes, and a stipend, for as long as I remain silent.”

He was greatly aggrieved for her. “Aren’t you enraged about it? Haven’t they taken horrid advantage of you?”

“Not really. I didn’t imagine I’d ever wed, and I couldn’t permit her to harm my father’s only son. I had to protect him, and I have protected him. When this occurred, I was so young too. And mourning for my father. I didn’t make the best

choice, but it's too late to fix it."

"What about Cassandra? It's been . . . what? Six years? Seven?"

"Yes, seven years. She's just . . . Cassandra. She went on with her life, and she intends to marry very high, to an appropriate gentleman."

His gaze narrowed. "It seems very duplicitous to me. Should you help them conceal this from her suitors?"

"I constantly struggle with that very question. I saved my brother from a dire fate, and I figured out a method to support him and Edna. To ease my conscience, I remind myself it's not *my* secret. It's theirs. I simply stay away from them as much as I can. I realize that's a paltry rationalization, but I'm a woman, Warwick. I don't have a ton of options."

"What is Cassandra's opinion about your sacrifice?"

"She acts as if it didn't happen, as if Charlie were a malignant tumor that was cut out of her body. It's why I don't socialize with either of them. I'm choking on their hypocrisy."

"What if I'd liked her very much and had decided to wed her? Would you have told me then?"

"Will you hate me if I say I'm not sure? It's why I repeatedly asked you whether you'd marry her. I have an endless debate with myself: Should I tattle? Should I not? Can I imperil Edna and Charlie? If it was just me, I'd probably blather the truth to the world, but I have them to fret over, so I'm always confused about the right path."

"Has Cassandra had any serious swains?"

"No, so I haven't had to examine my conduct very deeply."

He raised an issue she hadn't expected. "Might she have a drinking problem? Have there been any rumors?"

Cassandra had numerous vices, with alcohol being only one of them. "Yes, she drinks too much."

"She's ruined, and she has a bastard son she doesn't acknowledge. I can't deduce which of those facts is more damning." He leaned over and bestowed a fierce kiss. "I'm flattered that you confided in me. It feels as if I'm even closer to you now."

"You can't ever tell. Remember? You promised."

"Your secret is safe with me, but I'm incensed for you. They stained your reputation and your good name, and they don't appear to be grateful."

She chuckled, but miserably. "My reputation wasn't all that grand. As for my

good name, my father had pretty much destroyed it, so there wasn't much to wreck."

"None of this seems fair to me, and I loathe Blanche Milton. She tricked and coerced you when you were too young to grasp the ramifications of what she was demanding."

She rested a palm on his cheek. "She didn't want Charlie, and I couldn't let her get rid of him. Our arrangement means I was allowed to keep him. I have my studio and the money I require to paint. I couldn't have managed it on my own, and I'm not like other women. I would have suffocated in a more ordinary existence. I couldn't have wed some dull oaf who would have spent his time, reining in my worst tendencies. I'm free here and that's worth everything to me."

"You gave up a lot."

"And I gained what I needed."

He shifted onto his back and stared at the ceiling. He drew her to him, so she was draped over his chest, her ear over his heart. She could hear its steady beating. They were quiet, and ultimately, she said, "What are you thinking about?"

He snorted with amusement. "I was going to sneak over to say goodbye *and* to apprise you that Mrs. Milton was angry, but I guess I don't have to deliver any warnings."

"Blanche and I understand each other."

"I'm not certain you're correct."

"We have our ups and downs, but she has bought my silence. We're both content—in our own way."

"I'm stunned by this, and I'm furious too. It's such deceitful behavior by Cassandra. Gad, I could have wound up shackled to her!"

"You didn't though. You dodged a bullet, so you should be relieved about it."

"I am, but what if she's betrothed someday? What will you do then?"

She popped up on an elbow. "I'll cross that bridge when I come to it. As I mentioned, it's *their* secret. Not mine. Is it up to me to rectify their transgressions? I don't know. In my view, I assumed plenty of the burden by having the shame fall on my shoulders."

He snuggled her down, and they were quiet again, pondering what he'd learned.

"You're not upset with me, are you?" she asked.

"No, not at all, but what time is it?"

"I have no idea."

"I should return to the manor, but after this revelation, I can't imagine leaving you alone."

"I deal with this situation every minute, so it's like a gnat buzzing in the background. It was a huge blessing for me to discuss it with you. I like you so much, and I hated to have you thinking badly of me."

"I didn't think badly of you. I've led such a dissolute life myself that I try to never be overly judgmental. What will you tell Charlie about his father? When he's older, he'll start pestering you."

"He already pesters me, and as with every other facet of this quagmire, I have no viable answers. Edna told him he was left in the woods by the fairies."

He snickered, then sobered. "I doubt he'll believe that forever."

He rolled so they were nose to nose again. He ran a hand over her face, down her arm and thigh, as if he was imprinting a memory of her into his palm. Then he kissed her, and there was so much emotion swirling that tears stung her eyes. How would she survive without him? How would she abide the tedious days after he departed?

"I'm glad we met," he said. "If you ever need anything, you have to swear you'll contact me. I'll always be your friend."

"I like hearing that, but I can't suppose I'd ever need your assistance."

"You can't predict what might happen, and I don't trust Mrs. Milton. You shouldn't trust her either."

"I decided that on my own."

He eased away and sat up. She sat up too.

"Will you walk me out?" he asked.

"Only to the studio door. There shouldn't be anyone in the garden, but I can't risk our being observed."

"I hope to be on the road very early, so I probably won't see you again."

"So . . . this is goodbye."

"Yes, this is goodbye," he said. "Are you sure you won't travel to London with me? There's room for you in my carriage. We could take Edna and Charlie too."

"What would you do with us once we arrived?"

"We'd figure it out."

It was the spot where she was most tempted, but she couldn't convince herself that it could work. At the moment, he was eager to have her attach herself, but she suspected it was a fleeting sentiment. After he was home and immersed in his regular

routines, he wouldn't be too keen to have dragged along two women and a boy who were practically strangers.

"I just can't come," she said.

"I thought I should ask. I'm lucky, so here at the last minute, I might have changed your mind."

They stared, smiled, and stared some more, then he stood and pulled her to her feet. He stole a final kiss, then hurried out without another word, and she couldn't deduce if she was hurt or relieved. She detested farewells, and he'd cut the cord quickly and completely.

She tiptoed after him, keeping him in sight as he crossed the garden, then climbed onto the verandah and crept into the house. Shortly, a candle was lit in a bedchamber, and she imagined it was his.

She closed her eyes and sent him every happy wish, then she returned to her studio. She dawdled at her drawing table and reviewed every second of their acquaintance so she'd never forget a single detail.

He'd flirted with her to the point where she might have shamed herself in any fashion he'd demanded. With her on his hook, he'd offered her a commitment, but a lewd one. He'd begged her to be his mistress. His mistress! Her! Wilhelmina Dobbs! Daughter of famed artist Jefferson Dobbs!

She didn't have the bloodlines to be his bride, and she didn't want to ever be a wife, but she enjoyed contemplating how she might have been *his*. What if he'd been brazen enough to wed an exotic, inappropriate female like her?

A gentleman didn't have to marry for status, money, or property, but a gentleman always did. She wondered if, in the future, he'd ever be curious as to how she might have responded if he'd tendered a decent proposal rather than a lecherous one. What if he had? How might she have replied?

Over the months and years, it was a question she would ask herself many times. How *might* she have replied?

Chapter Twelve



"I'M GLAD THAT'S OVER."

Warwick glanced at Holden and said, "I agree with you."

"Next time you invite me to a party," Holden said, "I'll contemplate carefully before I decide to join you."

They were in Warwick's carriage, having finally departed Hill Haven. Holden was a sluggard in the mornings, and Mrs. Smithwaite had brought a ton of luggage that had taken forever to load. It was after nine, and they'd just pulled away.

So much for leaving shortly after dawn!

Like a besotted boy, he yearned to pull on the curtain and stare out, hoping for a last glimpse of Wilhelmina's cottage, but he forced himself not to look. He missed her already, which was stupid and inexplicable, and he'd rather not have his two companions witness any of his longing.

Neither Cassandra nor Blanche Milton had staggered down to see them off, so he'd managed to escape without having an awkward goodbye.

He was seated on one side of the vehicle, and Holden and Mrs. Smithwaite were on the other. It was clear, the debauched pair had cemented their amorous attachment. She was snuggled to Holden so tightly that she was practically sitting on his lap.

Unfortunately for her, Holden was easily bored, so no woman could hold his attention. Warwick figured—when he bumped into her in the future—she'd be cursing Holden's fickle tendencies and asking Warwick for advice as to how she could win him back.

She chimed in with, "The party wasn't so bad. Mrs. Milton is a bit of a shrew, but her chef dished up some incredible food. Her servants were competent and helpful, and every bottle from her wine cellar was delicious. I'd come again."

Warwick studied her, wondering how she could be so chatty. Didn't she realize

Wilhelmina would have informed him of their rude conversation? Didn't she understand how irked he was?

Apparently not.

"Mrs. Smithwaite," he started.

She cut him off and simpered, "Call me Rowena. I insist."

"All right, Rowena. Would you like to explain your visit to Wilhelmina Dobbs?"

She paused for an eternity, debating what her reply should be. Denial? Confusion? Ultimately, she settled on, "Oh, that! I was walking in the garden, and I simply popped in to look at more of her beautiful paintings." She peered at Holden and inquired, "Will you really check on her entering the Royal Exhibition? She's so talented."

"I will check," Holden said. "I think she's amazing."

Rowena smiled at Warwick, and there was a hint of warning in her gaze, as if he should drop the subject, but Warwick never let anyone interfere in his private business. They weren't friends, and she shouldn't have butted her nose into his amour.

She'd overstepped so many bounds that he couldn't determine where to begin in addressing them. Yet should he address them?

They'd be trapped in the carriage for hours, and if he reprimanded her, the entire trip would be unpleasant. He was in a temper though. He wished the world were a different kind of place, so a man of his station would have more options with regard to a female like Wilhelmina.

Basically, he had three choices: marriage, mistress, no further contact. When he was so bloody infatuated, how was that fair?

"Why would you talk to her about me?" Warwick asked.

"Who claimed we talked about *you*? Miss Dobbs was mad to tell you that. We discussed her artistic skills and how hard it is for a woman to succeed. That's all."

"You're a terrible liar," Warwick said. "I believe her and not you, so would you like to clarify your behavior?"

Holden glared at her and asked, "What did you do?"

"It was nothing." She waffled a hand, as if she could wave away the topic. "I barely know Mr. Stone or Miss Dobbs. How could I possibly have had a relevant comment to impart?"

Holden rolled his eyes, stared at Warwick, and repeated, "What did she do?"

"She lectured Miss Dobbs about my relationship with her," Warwick said.

“She told her I was a cad and Miss Dobbs was too naïve to ward off my dastardly advances.”

Holden smirked. “Were you able to implement a few dastardly advances toward her? I was curious about it. In her studio that day, you seemed quite smitten.”

“I didn’t trifle with her,” Warwick fibbed.

Holden recognized the falsehood for what it was. Rowena, though, felt compelled to redeem herself by offering justifications.

“Your affection was so blatant; I was merely worried you’d get her into trouble with Mrs. Milton.”

“I can’t imagine you and I will ever be pushed together like this again,” he said, “but don’t inject yourself into my life. Don’t scold my mistresses. Don’t lecture my friends. Don’t bother others on my behalf. I don’t need your assistance.”

Her cheeks heated, and she appeared chastened. “I’m sorry, and I most humbly apologize. I was counselling Miss Dobbs. I was so afraid she was headed in a dangerous direction, and she wouldn’t have noticed.”

“Apology accepted,” Warwick muttered, but he wasn’t sure he was sincere.

For several minutes, they rode in an uncomfortable silence, then Holden decided to lighten the mood.

“Speaking of Cassandra Milton,” he said.

“Were we?” Warwick’s tone was much too snide, so he reined in his attitude. He didn’t want to bicker all the way to town. “What about her? Did you stumble on her in an even more appalling predicament?”

Rowena was like a hawk sighting a rabbit. “What was the predicament you witnessed, Holden? I thought she was very annoying, so I won’t be surprised.”

“I was in the garden the other night,” Holden said, “and I literally bumped into her. She was very intoxicated.”

“I heard two housemaids whispering about her. I’m betting it’s an open secret.”

“That odd duck, Mr. Boswell, was lurking in the bushes,” Holden said. “He rushed over and rescued me from the encounter, which was a huge relief. She was glommed onto me so tightly we could have been embracing.”

“My goodness!” Rowena rippled with glee, as if she was sustained by an appetite of juicy gossip. “Is she really an innocent country maiden? She’s twenty-three after all. Who can guess how she amuses herself?”

Holden said to Warwick, “You were smart to pass on her, and I don’t mean

because of the drinking.”

Rowena’s eyes were wide as saucers. “What else do you know? Don’t you dare keep it to yourself.”

“I’ve been debating whether to bring it up, but with Warwick rejecting a betrothal, I don’t have to be circumspect.”

Warwick let Rowena ask the questions. “What have you learned about her? Is it horrid?”

“I’m not certain if *horrid* is the word I’d choose,” Holden said. “I think *disturbing* is more accurate. I was in Scotland six or seven years ago, at a dreary hunting party in the middle of nowhere. I saw Miss Milton and Miss Dobbs walking on a rural lane, but I’d forgotten about it until I crossed paths with them at Hill Haven.”

“What were they doing?”

“Quarreling. It’s why I remember them. They were standing in the road, and my driver had to maneuver the horses by them. I definitely observed an incident I shouldn’t have.”

With Holden mentioning Scotland, Warwick had deduced what was coming, so his expression was carefully blank, but Rowena was on the edge of her seat.

“What was it? Spill all, you wretched tease!”

Holden raised a brow at Warwick. “Miss Milton was in the family way.”

“No!” Rowena breathed. “Are you sure?”

“I’m absolutely sure. She was round as a gourd. There was no mistaking her condition.”

“But . . . but . . . she pretends to be suitable for a high marriage,” Rowena stammered. “How could she have the audacity?”

“Obviously, she landed herself in a jam, and she was sent away to hide her shame. It worked. She slithered home and resumed her life, with no one the wiser as to her ruined state.”

“What must have happened to her child?” Rowena asked. “Might it have died during the birthing? Would they have given it away to an orphanage?”

“I’m wondering about that blond boy in the painting.” Holden’s focus on Warwick intensified. “Isn’t Miss Dobbs declared to be a fallen woman? He looks just like her, but I’m supposing he looks just like her father too. What if *he* is the father and Miss Milton the mother? Jefferson Dobbs was an infamous roué, and Miss Milton is a tart. From what I discovered about her, that situation seems likely to me.”

Rowena quickly inferred what Holden was implying. “The boy is son of Miss Milton and Jefferson Dobbs? Miss Dobbs took the blame and is rearing their bastard?”

Holden shrugged. “I’m merely speculating. It’s very unusual. What’s your opinion, Warwick? You spent time with Miss Milton, and you became awfully cordial with Miss Dobbs. Are they capable of such subterfuge?”

“I have no idea,” Warwick said, “and that’s a terrible story. I’d rather not engage in any conjecture.”

Holden sputtered out a laugh. “You could have wound up wed to Miss Milton, and you don’t wish to discuss it?”

“If what you’ve postulated about her is even remotely true, then it’s reprehensible, and I feel sorry for swains who dance attendance on her in the future.”

Holden snorted, not buying Warwick’s blasé attitude. “Good thing it won’t be you, huh? You were shrewd enough to run for the hills.”

“Well, I was shrewd enough to return to London anyway.”

“Will you recommence your marital search?” Holden asked. “Has this foray into matrimonial wrangling whetted your appetite for more? Or has it soured you on any further attempts?”

“It’s soured my attitude, so could we talk about a different topic? I’d like to forget about Cassandra Milton.”

He couldn’t bear to reflect on Cassandra, and he was dreadfully morose. Blanche Milton had prevailed on Wilhelmina when she’d been grieving and naïve, and her duplicity meant Wilhelmina would suffer dishonor forever. She’d claimed she didn’t mind, that her bargain—for the cottage, studio, and custody of Charlie—had been worth it, but Warwick vehemently disagreed.

He yearned to vent a thousand remarks on the subject of Cassandra and Blanche Milton, but he couldn’t. He wasn’t the most ethical fellow, but he’d promised his silence to Wilhelmina, so he shifted away, pulled on the curtain, and studied the scenery.

Holden’s gaze grew even more probing. He knew Warwick wasn’t sharing an important detail, but he didn’t press. Warwick stared outside, Rowena prattled on inanely, and Holden pretended to listen to her all the way to London.

As the journey ended, and he was shed of them and locked in his own apartment, he’d never been more delighted to be alone. He finally had a chance to ponder Wilhelmina—and the loss of her—in private.



"AM I ABOUT TO have another daughter-in-law?"

"No."

Neville glared at Warwick and said, "Why not? What was wrong with her?"

"Everything?"

"No girl is perfect."

"And some are totally *imperfect*."

They were at Neville's favorite gambling club, *Ralston's*, and sequestered in a salon. He had friends coming to play cards, but he'd dine first. His great chum, Sybil Jones, who owned the club, served some of the best suppers in the city. Her staff of chefs was French, and she spared no expense at feeding her members.

He was seated at a gaming table, and Warwick was pacing. A few days earlier, his son had returned from the country, and when he didn't seek out Neville immediately, Neville figured he knew what the verdict would be, so he wasn't surprised by Warwick's negative view.

Yet he *was* surprised too. Blanche, when they'd been younger, had been beautiful and elegant. Her deceased husband, Harold, had been sensible and handsome. Neville firmly believed blood made the man *or* the woman. How could two such refined, wealthy people create a child who wasn't exquisite?

"What was wrong with her?" Neville asked again.

"Besides her being flighty, immature, and a renowned drunkard?"

Neville scowled. "She drinks to excess? Blanche definitely didn't mention that bad habit when she wrote to me. I wonder if she's aware of it."

"It was only one of her problems. There is a huge one that's so shocking I can't confess what it is."

Neville scoffed. "What did you discover? I should probably hear about it, in case Blanche contacts any of my acquaintances about their sons. I should be able to warn them."

"I won't tell you, despite how you nag. Just trust me when I say I could never have wed her."

"I'll take your word for it, and I won't nag. I have dozens of letters at home, from mothers praising their daughters. Why don't you come by tomorrow and look

through them? We can arrange another introduction.”

“Stop it!” Warwick sharply said. “I have no desire to meet with any candidates. My foray to Hill Haven showed how blithely you would toss me into an appalling situation. Why didn’t you investigate before you sent me?”

“Why would I have investigated Cassandra Milton? I’ve been friends with her parents for most of my life. I didn’t need an extensive evaluation.”

“Your comment simply proves that I can’t rely on you to handle this for me.”

“How about if we hire a matchmaker?”

Warwick winced. “No.”

“You have to pick someone, so what would you suggest?”

“I would *suggest* that you bugger off.”

Neville chuckled and sipped his brandy, watching as Warwick continued to pace. Of his three sons, Warwick was the most placid and accommodating. As boys, they’d been rambunctious terrors, but Hunter and Sheridan were the most headstrong. Warwick, as the middle child, was quieter, kinder, and less difficult to manage. What could have put him in such a dither?

“Would you sit down?” Neville said. “I’m growing dizzy as you strut back and forth.”

“I can’t sit. I’m too aggravated.”

“By what?”

“By you! By your coercing me into traveling to Hill Haven. It was a complete waste of time.”

“So shrug it off and move on. England is a kingdom of fetching maidens. We’ll find one to tickle your fancy.”

“I don’t want to marry.”

“I never wanted to either, but it’s expected of men like us. And don’t forget that we don’t have a choice.”

“We always have choices,” Warwick said, rather snottily in Neville’s opinion.

Neville pointed to a chair, his glower wearing Warwick down. He’d be the first to admit he’d been an awful parent, but he could command his boys when he felt like it. In the end, Warwick lost their small battle of wills. He staggered over and plopped down.

“What’s bothering you,” Neville said, “and don’t lie. It’s clear you’re troubled, and it’s being caused by more than Cassandra Milton.”

There was a liquor tray on the table. He grabbed an empty glass, filled it with

brandy, then shoved it over. Warwick downed the contents in a hasty gulp.

"How was Hill Haven?" Neville asked. "I haven't been there in years."

"It's a lovely property."

"And how was Blanche?"

"Fine, I guess."

"Why didn't you like Cassandra? What happened?"

"She's a secret sot, and there are other . . . *issues* with her character that were very upsetting to me."

"What issues?"

Warwick glared for an eternity, then changed the subject. "You knew the famous painter, Jefferson Dobbs, didn't you?"

"Yes, I knew him, but what a peculiar question."

"What was he like?"

"Insane and wild."

"In other words, he was just like you?"

"He was quite a bit worse than I ever dreamed of being."

"How was he worse?"

"For one thing, he couldn't keep his trousers buttoned."

Warwick had just refilled his brandy and taken another swig. On hearing Neville's remark, he coughed and pounded on his chest. "Dobbs couldn't keep *his* trousers buttoned? That's certainly the pot calling the kettle black."

"He thought he walked on water, and his pompous attitude was annoying to those of us who actually do walk on water. He was an up-jumped nobody."

"You didn't like him."

"I did and I didn't. He was a flamboyant genius, but he could be exhausting."

"I met his daughter."

"He had a daughter?"

"Yes. Wilhelmina? She lives in a cottage on the property. Mr. Dobbs was cousins with Mrs. Milton's husband."

"Now that you mention it, I seem to recollect that connection."

"They moved there shortly before her father's death. Mrs. Milton was a patron of sorts, and she offered them a house. His daughter resides in it. She paints too," he added, which was apropos of exactly nothing.

"Why are you telling me about her?" Neville asked. "Was there a scandal with the two of you? Have you seduced her? Is Blanche angry? Will she be penning furious

screeds to me and demanding your head on a platter?"

Warwick snorted with disgust. "No. I've simply been thinking about her. I asked her to be my mistress."

Neville's jaw dropped. " *You* nearly took a mistress? I sent you to find a wife, not a doxy."

"She wasn't a doxy," Warwick testily said.

"From your morose condition, it's obvious you were entirely too intrigued by her. Please still my pattering heart and swear it was a fling. If her father was any indication, that Dobbs bloodline is cursed. Her father was deranged; everyone thought so. You can't have been smitten. I refuse to believe it."

"I wasn't smitten. I was . . . was . . ." Warwick cut off, his expression bewildered, then he waved away his confusion. "Don't pay any attention to me. I'm being absurd."

"What did you like about her?"

"She was just so different. She was sassy and lonely and . . . and . . . so interesting. And her artistic talent! You should see some of her paintings! Gad, she was so beautiful. There was an air about her, you know? When she strolled into a room, men would follow her around like trained puppies."

His son's description was the longest he'd ever uttered in Neville's presence. How advanced was their liaison? Should it be nipped in the bud?

"I hope you didn't have an affair with her," Neville said. "You can't carry on like that at a house party. Your hostess will generally look askance at your dallying with the poor relative."

"I didn't dally with her, and I'm not a besotted swain."

"Aren't you?"

"It was a stressful trip, and the worst portion of it occurred on the last evening. Mrs. Milton cornered me to learn if I'd propose."

"She accosted you about it?"

"Yes, and from how incensed she was, I'm amazed she didn't yank out a cane and rap my knuckles. I felt ten years old."

"I'm sorry she confronted you. She should have dealt with me."

"The whole charade left a sour taste in my mouth, and I can't picture myself engaging in any further matrimonial interviews."

"You can't mean that."

"Oh, but I do."

He stood, and Neville asked, "Where are you going?"

"I merely stopped by to give you a report on my visit. I'm going home."

"Why don't you stay for supper?"

"No, thank you. I'm too livid to tarry."

"How long will it take for you to calm down?"

"I'm very, very calm." Warwick's irked glower belied his words.

"If you are so fixated on Miss Dobbs, why don't you travel to the country and speak to her again about being your mistress? You possess all my charm, so I'm sure you can persuade her."

"First off, Mrs. Milton discovered my fascination and forbade me to ever return."

Neville tsked with regret. "That's unfortunate."

"And second, Miss Dobbs isn't impressed by me. She deems men to be fickle, and she didn't trust I would truly support her, so she wouldn't risk her stable situation for me."

Neville snickered with amusement. "Don't you hate it when a woman won't behave as you've demanded?"

Warwick stared down at him, as if he'd hurl a hundred insults, but he tamped them down. "Goodnight, Neville. Try not to gamble away the rest of our money."

Neville smirked. "I couldn't possibly. We're too rich."

His son spun and marched out, and Neville eased back in his chair.

Apparently, an incredible amount of drama had transpired at Hill Haven, the most disturbing being a romantic amour with Jefferson Dobbs' daughter.

Neville shuddered at the notion.

Dobbs had been a brilliant genius, and due to his acclaim, Neville and his friends had tolerated the snotty oaf, but they'd never really welcomed him into their tight circle of scoundrels. Even for them—men who'd been some of London's most notorious rogues—his conduct had been too outrageous.

Neville would write to Blanche and get her version of the debacle. No matter what, Warwick's infatuation with Miss Dobbs had to be crushed, and it had to happen as quickly as Neville could manage it. Passionate obsessions usually flamed out, but not always. What if Warwick's continued to burn like an inferno?

It couldn't be allowed to fester. What would end it in the swiftest way?

Blanche was the key. As soon as he arrived home later, he'd draft a long letter.



“IS THERE ANYTHING YOU’D like to tell me?”

Blanche glared at Edna Stewart. Edna gaped blankly and said, “Not that I can think of.”

“You didn’t feel you should mention the fact that Warwick Stone had developed a fervent attachment to Wilhelmina?”

Edna scoffed. “No, he didn’t. Why would you assume that?”

Blanche harumphed in a derogatory manner that was humiliating. It made her sound like an aged old crone. “I saw them together in the garden. They were holding hands, and Mr. Stone nearly kissed her.”

“You have to be exaggerating.”

“Were they carrying on in the cottage? Why am I positive they were and you’re hiding it from me?”

“He was there—once—on the day of the final hunt. He’d tumbled off his horse, and he was bleeding. We brought him inside and tended his injury. That’s it.”

“You know, Edna,” Blanche fumed, “I don’t have to let you live here. I pay you to apprise me of the important events regarding Wilhelmina. If you can’t or won’t do your part, what good are you to me?”

Blanche pushed by her and kept on toward Wilhelmina’s studio. Her flirtation with Warwick Stone had Blanche wondering if she shouldn’t declare it the last straw. Wilhelmina had promised she would never interfere in Cassandra’s courting rituals, yet that is precisely what she’d done.

Blanche would like to kick Wilhelmina out on the road and force her to take her bastard half-brother with her, but she and Wilhelmina were joined at the hip. When Blanche had entered into their Devil’s bargain, she’d been in a distraught condition, so she hadn’t understood the full ramifications. She hadn’t realized that it meant she’d never be shed of Wilhelmina.

In coercing Wilhelmina to don the role of fallen woman, Blanche had thought she was so smart, that she’d come out the winner, but they’d both lost. They were locked in a bubble of disgrace and dishonor, with Cassandra the only one prancing about unscathed. She acted as if she scarcely remembered the trouble she’d caused. Blanche and Wilhelmina had been left to deal with the aftermath.

If Blanche severed ties with Wilhelmina, she would be free to blab Blanche's secrets. Cassandra's reputation would be obliterated, and where would Blanche be then?

She approached the studio, and through the windows, she could see Wilhelmina busy at an easel. She was dressed in what she'd dubbed her *painting* clothes: trousers, smock, apron, boots, her hair up in a messy chignon. Her movements were fluid and elegant, so a person couldn't glance away.

Every detail about her, down to the smallest piece, was infuriating.

She was her father's daughter, and when Blanche looked at her, she recalled Jefferson, how she'd always loved him, how she'd assumed—with Harold dead and Jefferson residing in the cottage—she might snag him for her own, but he'd chosen Cassandra instead!

It was a mortification from which Blanche had never recovered.

She walked in without knocking, and Wilhelmina didn't bother to turn away from her canvas. Her disrespect enraged Blanche, but she swallowed down her wrath. It was pointless to fight with Wilhelmina. The girl had no shame and couldn't be cowed.

"What did you need, Blanche?" she asked, her tone bored. "If you'd deign to saunter in, I presume a catastrophe has occurred."

"Tell me about Warwick Stone," Blanche demanded without preamble.

"Warwick Stone? Why would you inquire about him?"

"I insist on hearing your side of the story."

"What story? You could be speaking in riddles."

"The two of you were in the garden. You were holding hands."

The accusation caused Wilhelmina to yank her focus from the canvas. She tsked with disgust, as if Blanche was a great nuisance. "I barely know Mr. Stone, so you must be going blind."

"Swear to me that you had no affair with him."

Wilhelmina ignored the command, but gestured to her easel, indicating what Blanche had failed to see: a portrait of Warwick Stone—in all his dubious glory.

"It's quite an accurate likeness, don't you think?" Wilhelmina said. "I had trouble getting his smile just right, but I may have finally captured it."

Blanche's blood boiled. "You have the gall to claim you barely know him, yet you studied him closely enough to paint him?"

"He stopped by several times to assess my work, and I'd sketch him from

memory after he departed.” She stepped back, scrutinizing her attempt. “What is your opinion? It’s very good, but then, he’s so handsome. He’s a terrific subject.”

He was leaned in the doorway of the studio, arms crossed over his chest. His mouth was quirked, as if he had a secret. The garden was behind him, but she hadn’t added those details. It was just him, garbed in a blue coat, tan trousers, and black boots. He stared out leisurely, his cravat untied, his hair loose.

It was a disturbingly sexual pose. He looked like the cad he was reputed to be, as if he’d recently crawled out of a paramour’s bed. He looked like the sort of man mothers warned their daughters about, like the sort of man a young lady hoped she’d meet so she could misbehave with him.

How and when had Wilhelmina witnessed this aspect of him? Or did she simply have a very vivid imagination?

“His father, Lord Swindon, wrote to me,” Blanche said. “He’s ordered me to inform him of what happened between the two of you.”

Wilhelmina scowled. “Lord Swindon wrote to you about *me*? How bizarre.”

“He advises me that Mr. Stone is completely infatuated, and he’s reproached me for fostering a salacious environment for my guests.”

“Were you fostering a salacious environment? As I was rarely in the manor during Mr. Stone’s visit, I have no idea what type of entertainment you provided.”

“Don’t be impertinent,” Blanche seethed. “Admit your sin. Admit you seduced him.”

Wilhelmina chuckled. “You believe *I* could have seduced Mr. Stone? I am a poor relative who is exotic and strange. I have odd habits and peculiar quirks. Why would he have noticed me?”

“You deliberately stole him from Cassandra. I ought to have you whipped!”

Blanche shouldn’t have threatened violence, but she was just so aggrieved. Neville Stone was another man from her past, a man she’d loved. With his agreeing to pursue a match between their children, she’d let a few dreams simmer, where she might have rekindled their prior affection.

But Neville was accusing her of bad conduct, and despite Wilhelmina’s denials, she was sure the beautiful vixen had inhibited Mr. Stone’s courtship of Cassandra. She had no conscience or scruples, and Blanche had to find a way to be rid of her, but how? What step could she take that wouldn’t send calamity raining down on her own head?

“Did you tell him about Cassandra?” Blanche asked. “Is that why he decided

not to propose?"

"Why would I talk to him about her? When would he and I have had a private conversation?"

"You sketched him! He was here alone with you."

"I wasn't flirting. I was *working*, which I recognize that you fail to view as genuine effort."

"If I ever discover that you tattled, there will have to be consequences."

"You live in fear over what I might ultimately say about Cassandra, and I pity you for being balanced on the edge of such an exhausting cliff. I can't persuade you of the truth, but I seldom ponder either of you."

"Liar. We are front and center in your every waking moment, just as you are front and center in ours."

"I'm busy," Wilhelmina said. "Are you finished complaining?"

"Will you explain yourself? Will you confess your infamy with Mr. Stone?"

Wilhelmina set down her brush and picked up a rag. She wiped flecks of paint off her hands, and evidently, she was preparing an important response. Blanche braced, ready for anything, but when Wilhelmina opened her mouth, Blanche felt as if they were babbling in different languages.

"The Royal Exhibition starts in three weeks," Wilhelmina said. "I'm planning to attend, and I'd like to stay at your town house. Will you let me? I hope you won't force me to rent lodging at a hotel or coaching inn."

Blanche owned a fine residence in London, and she kept a small staff there. It was a stupid expense, but she couldn't convince herself to sell it. The property represented a happier period in her life, when she'd caroused with dashing libertines like Neville Stone and Jefferson Dobbs. They'd tantalized her in a manner that boring, steady Harold never could.

"That's your answer to my allegations of misconduct?" she fumed. "You want to stay at my town house?"

"Yes. May I?"

"Will you give me no accounting of your friendship with Mr. Stone? What should I tell his father?"

"You may tell Lord Swindon to stuff it. If Mr. Stone has developed an unusual attachment to me, I can supply no clarification as to why."

"When I host parties in the future, you will not be welcome. I realize you think Cassandra's nuptial search is a joke, but I won't have you interfering."

“How often must I repeat myself? I couldn’t care less who Cassandra marries. Her secret is safe with me. Now would you leave me be? I’m weary of your nagging.”

Wilhelmina’s expression was so dismissive that Blanche yearned to slap her, but where Wilhelmina was concerned, stern outbursts were futile. She thought she was smarter than everyone else. She thought she was so superior. Her father had been exactly the same.

Blanche whirled away and marched out, and Wilhelmina taunted her with, “You didn’t state your opinion, Blanche. Have I created a good likeness of Mr. Stone or not?”

It was a provocative comment, and she was smiling in her arrogant, condescending way.

“It looks just like him,” Blanche said. “You make the observer understand what a scoundrel he is.”

“It’s obvious he’s a scoundrel? Perfect. I guess I’m on the right track.”

Blanche stomped off. She’d like to have hurled a parting retort that would have put Wilhelmina in her place, but it was impossible to have the last word with her. It was impossible to win with her, and perhaps Blanche should quit trying.

Chapter Thirteen



WILHELMINA HANDED OVER HER ticket to the Royal Exhibition, and she entered the cavernous building where the event was being held. It was a three-story display of England's finest paintings. The salons were filled with artwork that stretched to the ceiling and every inch of wall was covered.

It was a montage of landscapes and portraits, of fruit bowls and rose gardens, of ships on the water and horses in the pasture. Most of the renderings were quite average, many were horrid, and a few were brilliant. Occasionally, a frame sported a ribbon in the corner, an indication that it had been judged to be excellent and the artist was in line to win a cash prize.

She had none of her own hung on any of the walls. As far as she was aware, women still weren't allowed to participate, or if they were, that scapegrace, Lord Drake, had never apprised her.

Typical male, she mused.

She often groused about the unfairness of her life, but on this splendid afternoon, she wouldn't complain. Not when she'd escaped Hill Haven for an entire week. Not when she had Blanche's town house all to herself. Not when she could spend several days staring at canvases. The show reminded her of her father, and it made her happy that she'd followed in his footsteps—even if no one would ever know.

She'd attended the Exhibition in the past, when her father had been alive. When he'd strolled through the rooms, spectators had gasped and clapped, then trailed after him to eavesdrop. Wilhelmina had trudged in his wake, watching him, yearning to *be* him someday even though—as a girl—she'd understood it wouldn't be possible.

The main parlors were packed with people, with the work of the more renowned artists arranged on the ground floor. The newcomers and the novices were on the upper floors. The deeper a person went, the less skill was evident, but it was her first visit, and she was eager to avoid the crowds.

She skirted the mob and climbed to the third floor. It was quieter and emptier. She began snooping, looking at every picture, sighing with delight when she saw beauty, clucking her tongue when she saw mistakes or bad choices.

After a bit, she noted a strange charge in the air, and the hair on her neck prickled. She glanced around, curious as to what had caused the unusual sensation, and there, at the end of the room was Warwick Stone. He was by himself, his back to her.

As she'd prepared to travel to town, she'd wondered if she might be lucky enough to bump into him. He'd streaked across her sky like a blazing comet, and since he'd departed Hill Haven, nothing had been the same. She'd caught herself snapping at Edna, objecting over trifles, being short-tempered with Charlie.

Gradually, it had dawned on her that she was missing him—like a silly debutante! Though it was humiliating to admit it, she was half in love with him, and she couldn't figure out where to put the emotion that was rocking her. During their brief flirtation, she hadn't intended to let her heart become involved, but she'd lowered her guard, and it had happened without her considering the ramifications.

He'd realized she was special and unique, and with him confirming her own opinion, he'd lit a fire in her breast, so her craving for *more* was out of control. She was anxious to flee Hill Haven, to shuck off the yoke that bound her to the spot. She'd actually pondered waving goodbye to Edna and Charlie, forsaking them for a *man*.

When she'd reached that apex of misery—where she'd been ready to walk away from everything that mattered to her—she'd finally been able to calm down and resume a semblance of normalcy. Yet he'd been tossed in her path again. What now?

She studied him for as long as she dared, debating whether to say hello. If she talked to him, wouldn't it simply fuel her discontentment? It had been so hard to tamp it down. Should she place herself in a position to be morose and dejected? Could she bear it?

No . . .

She'd decided to tiptoe out, to never announce herself, when he turned toward her. An eerie silence enveloped them, where the Earth seemed to stop spinning on its axis, where Time seemed to stand still. He gaped at her, his confusion obvious, then he said, "Wilhelmina? Is it you?"

She smiled, suddenly feeling weepy. "Yes, it's me."

"Why are you in London?"

"I'm here for the Exhibition."

“You scamp! You should have informed me, so I could have been waiting for you to arrive.”

“I couldn’t contact you.” She shrugged. “It would have been . . . pointless, I guess.”

He peered behind her, as if checking to learn if she was by herself or not. Observing no one, he hurried over, grabbed her hand, and pulled her into the stairwell. He peeked up and down to see if anyone was climbing or descending, but just that second, they were alone.

He pushed her against the wall, his body pressed to hers all the way down. Then he was kissing her and kissing her, the embrace filled with huge doses of insane longing and reckless abandon. They clutched at each other like shipwreck survivors, as if each minute might be their last.

They only halted when voices echoed down below. Their lips parted, and they were grinning like naughty children who’d gotten away with mischief.

“Is Blanche with you?” he asked. “Is Cassandra?”

“No.”

He crushed a fist to his chest. “Oh, my lord! I may expire from gladness. Come.”

He started down the stairs, dragging her behind him. They barged by spectators, jostling them without apology, then they burst outside and continued down the street and around the block. His carriage was parked there, his outriders loafing, not expecting him to return so soon. As he approached, they leapt up and whipped the door open.

There was no polite delay to set the step; Warwick simply gripped her by the waist and lifted her in. She slid onto the seat, as he whispered instructions to his servants, then he jumped in too.

The door was shut and latched, the driver called to the horses, and the vehicle rolled away. She had no idea if he had a destination in mind, but she hoped they’d keep on to infinity. The curtains were drawn, and he sat next to her and snuggled her onto his lap, then he was kissing her again. It commenced quite desperately, then it slowly altered to an encounter that was sweet and dear.

Clearly, their fondness hadn’t faded in the least. If anything, their separation had made it flare hotter than ever.

“I can’t believe you’re here,” he said.

“I arrived yesterday, and I’m stunned that I ran into you immediately.”

"It feels as if our meeting was meant to be."

"Yes, there's a definite perception in the air that the universe wanted us to cross paths."

"I wasn't even planning to attend the Exhibition, but my father gave me a ticket he couldn't use. I marched in, and . . . there you were! Appearing like magic, before my very eyes."

They sighed, and she snuggled nearer.

"I nearly wrote you a thousand times," she said.

"And I almost travelled back to Hill Haven a thousand times. I couldn't convince myself to proceed though. I didn't think I should be a lout and sneak in when Mrs. Milton wasn't looking. If I'd been caught, you'd have been in trouble."

"I almost rushed to town to tell you I'd like to be your mistress after all. I missed you that much, but this is the only occasion where I'll ever confess it."

They sighed again, and they were smiling, cataloguing features. There was such a sense of destiny swirling, one they couldn't and shouldn't fight. What would happen to them? Any wild conclusion might occur.

"Did you quarrel with Mrs. Milton after I left?" he asked. "I've been so worried about you. She was so angry with me."

"Yes, she complained, but then, Blanche always complains. I'm the thorn she can't pluck out."

"I was so afraid she might evict you, and it would be my fault."

"I'm fine." Briefly, she deliberated whether she should stir a hornet's nest by mentioning his father's letter. Why not? Lord Swindon's pomposity galled her. "Were you aware that your father wrote to Blanche about me?"

"What? What did he say?"

"He accused her of hosting a risqué party, where I—a renowned temptress—was allowed to seduce you and wreck a perfectly good engagement." She batted her lashes. "According to him, you're such an innocent boy that you couldn't deflect my lewd advances."

"For pity's sake," he grumbled. "He called you a temptress?"

"Apparently yes."

"My father has never previously exerted himself on my behalf. I'm astonished he'd butt in now—over you. What was your answer to his allegation?"

"I told her I barely know you, and Lord Swindon was deranged to inquire about me for any reason."

“What was her opinion of your reply?”

“I’m an excellent liar, but even if she’d guessed I wasn’t being truthful, I don’t listen when she nags.”

“How long will you be in London?” he asked.

“The entire week. I’m leaving next Wednesday.”

“I can have you all to myself for seven whole days?”

“Yes, if you can stand that much of me.”

“Oh, I can stand it. Where are you staying?”

“Blanche has a town house. She might have made me rent a room at a coaching inn, but if any of her acquaintances had found out, she’d have been embarrassed, so she opened it for me. It’s just me and a few servants.”

He grinned. “This is sounding better by the minute.”

“I’d assumed I would simply keep myself busy by studying the paintings at the Exhibition.”

“We can waste an hour or two there every morning—if that’s what you wish. Then in the afternoons and evenings, there is the theater, plus an array of balls, musicales, and suppers. I’ll show you off and every other man will be green with envy.”

“I can’t strut about the city, socializing with you. What if Blanche learned of it? She’s very upset that you rejected Cassandra, and she wouldn’t like us to be cordial. She’d view it as such a betrayal by me.”

“If we revel, who would tell her?”

“London is a huge place, but in certain circles, it’s more tight-knit than a rural village. My father was notorious, so *I* am a tad notorious too. If you start introducing me, gossip will spread. I can’t risk Blanche hearing about us.”

“We’ll have to be careful then, so we’ll carry on more privately. After we stop by the Exhibition in the morning, we’ll sneak to my apartment and spend the rest of the day misbehaving in my bedchamber.”

“We’re not misbehaving,” she said. “And I’m most especially not about to be alone with you in your bachelor’s lodging. Who can predict what I might end up doing?”

“That’s what I’m counting on: that you won’t be able to resist giving me my heart’s desire.”

“I’m already at that spot. What will become of me if we fraternize? Who will I be once you’re finished with me?”

“I can’t imagine, but we’ll have quite a bit of fun on the way.” She hadn’t

noticed that the carriage wasn't moving, but he glanced out the curtain and said, "We're at my apartment. Will you come in?"

"No! Not after you mentioned you have wicked designs on my person."

"We could have tea in the drawing room. Would that be too shocking for you to consider?"

"Yes. I need to return to my own lodging, so I can contemplate my next steps. I didn't expect to see you, and my head is spinning."

"I guess I can force myself to convey you there. Where is it?" When she told him the neighborhood, he blanched, then laughed. "You're just down the street from me."

"Well, that's probably dangerous."

He spoke with an outrider, providing directions to Blanche's house, which truly was minutes away. Before she could blink, they'd arrived. She slid to the opposite seat, not eager for his servants to catch her sitting on his lap.

The door was opened, and an outrider extended a hand to help her climb out, but she didn't reach for it.

She stared at Warwick, pondering fate, pondering the future. What were the odds that she'd have bumped into him so quickly? Where would it lead? Most importantly, how would it conclude?

The answer to that question was easy: nowhere good.

She was a mature adult who'd had a worldly upbringing, so she understood about men and affairs. There was never a benefit to the woman, so she was courting trouble, but she didn't mind. Whatever transpired, she would be delighted to experience it, and she would never rue or regret.

"Did you pack any of your beautiful gowns?" he asked.

"Yes, I brought some of them, when there was no reason I would have. I must have subconsciously known I'd need them."

"What time do you suppose it is?"

"Three maybe? Four?"

"Let's attend the theater tonight. I'll be with a group of friends, so if anyone ever inquires later on, you can claim you were with them rather than me."

"Should I? Ooh, I can't decide what's best." Her thoughts were awhirl, weighing the hazards, weighing the bliss to be had.

"Don't think about it so hard. Say yes. Say you will."

He appeared so excited that she couldn't deny him. "All right. I haven't been

to the theater in ages, so I would love to accompany you.”

“And tomorrow, I have a soiree scheduled. I was planning to go alone, but you’ll be my guest.”

“What sort of gathering is it?”

“My brother, Hunter, and his new bride, Hannah, are in town. They married in a hurry, in the country, so our acquaintances haven’t met her. My father is introducing her to his friends. Some of them would have known *your* father.”

“I’m not sure I should socialize with Lord Swindon. After how he denigrated me to Blanche, if I walked in, I might give him an apoplexy.”

“Leave him to me,” he said. “I have no idea why he complained about you to Mrs. Milton, but he is a charming roué, and you’ll like him. You’re mine though, so you have to promise you won’t let him sweep you off your feet.”

She beamed with pleasure, but with exasperation too. He was luring her into his web, tempting her in a manner she relished. It was so difficult to refuse, and Blanche would be so incensed if she heard that Wilhelmina had romped with him. Then again, Blanche wasn’t her mother or her guardian.

It was simply that Wilhelmina didn’t like to upset her. But what were the chances of discovery? Would it be worth the risk?

She smiled. Yes, it would be worth it.

“Yes, I will attend your father’s soiree, but you must warn him not to be rude to me. I have a sharp tongue and I never suffer fools gladly.”

He chuckled. “I’ve learned that about you.”

“I must be mad to have agreed to this.”

“It’s part of my wily seduction scheme. As you grow more unhinged over me, it will be easier to corrupt you.”

She scoffed and frowned at him, nodding to the outrider who was listening to their every word. Warwick winked, apparently informing her that his servants were used to his amorous foibles, and they wouldn’t be shocked if she disgraced herself with him.

Well, she wouldn’t disgrace herself, but she would definitely enjoy her stay much more than she’d expected she would when she’d initially travelled to town.

“What time is the curtain?” she asked.

“Nine.”

“Come for me at seven. Could we have a whiskey somewhere first?”

“You know the way to my heart, dear lady. Seven it is.”

They sighed, ogling each other like a pair of lovestruck adolescents. Then she took the outrider's hand and climbed out.

"Shall I escort you inside?" Warwick asked.

"If I let you do that, I'd likely never be shed of you, so I'll see you at seven."

"Aren't I lucky?" he said.

He motioned to the outrider, and the man shut the door and leapt onto the box. The carriage rolled away, and as she dawdled and watched it vanish, a burst of melancholia rushed over her.

They'd just found each other, and he was departing!

But there was no need to fret. She'd be with him in a few hours, so she had to get in the house and start dressing. Hopefully, there was a skilled housemaid who could help her with her hair and clothes.

The vehicle was down the street and rounding the corner, and at the last second, Warwick leaned out the window and called, "I miss you already!"

She laughed and waved, then she went in. The butler greeted her in the foyer.

"How was the Exhibition?" he asked as she gave him her cloak and bonnet.

"It was marvelous. I'm so excited to be here for it."

"While you were out, you received a note from Mrs. Milton."

Wilhelmina scowled. "Is there trouble at home?"

"Not that I've heard."

He handed it to her, and as she flicked the seal, she displayed no reaction.

"Is it bad news?" he asked.

"No, but it means extra work for you and the staff. She and Miss Cassandra have decided to come for the Exhibition too. They'll arrive tomorrow."

"Does she indicate how long she'll be with us?"

"The whole week—the same as me."

Wilhelmina offered him the note, so he could read it himself, then she stomped up the stairs to her bedchamber.

She felt as if Blanche had reached out from Hill Haven to guarantee she didn't have too much fun. Wasn't that just like her? Blanche never came to London! Why the sudden change of heart? She'd never been interested in the Exhibition, not even when Wilhelmina's father had been entered in it.

Wilhelmina would have to cancel the activities she'd planned with Warwick, beginning with that evening's jaunt to the theater. With Blanche staggering in so soon, she didn't dare proceed with any of it. The servants might gossip, which would be a

disaster.

What had she been thinking? She hadn't been thinking; that was the problem. Warwick simply overwhelmed her better sense. She was a free and independent woman, so she could engage in many behaviors not allowed to other females, but she couldn't openly gambol with Warwick Stone. Blanche would kill her if she pursued a friendship with him.

She stopped on the landing and asked the butler, "Is there a writing tray in my room?"

"No, but I'll have one sent up immediately."

"I have to pen a message, then I have to have it delivered right away."

"I have two footmen who are cooling their heels and looking for chores. It will keep one of them busy."

She continued on, remembering that it wasn't wise to be *too* happy. Warwick had no place in her life, and she had no place in his. She was in the city for a serious purpose, that being to study some of England's best paintings. That endeavor had to be her goal. The chance to revel with him instead had been a tempting dream, but she couldn't permit herself to be tempted. She knew it was deranged, that she couldn't control herself around him, so she couldn't see him again. Could she?

She had to force herself to admit that their parting forever was the only solution for what ailed her.

Chapter Fourteen



“WOULD YOU LIKE TO explain yourself to me?”

“On what topic?”

Warwick glared at his father and said, “You wrote to Blanche Milton and chastised her for holding a risqué bacchanal. You accused her of letting the wicked vixen, Wilhelmina Dobbs, seduce me.”

“Oh, that.” Neville waved a hand, as if his letter was a non-issue.

“How old am I?” Warwick fumed.

Neville scowled. He’d never been the most dedicated parent. “Twenty-five?”

“Close, but wrong. I’m twenty-nine. Apparently though, you think I’m ten, and you have the right to butt your nose into my private business.”

“If I live to be a hundred, you’ll still be my son. I will always have an opinion about your behavior.”

They were seated in his father’s library, in his London mansion. Warwick had tracked him down when he was somewhere besides a gambling club. It was the story of his life that Neville could be found in a scandalous place with disreputable acquaintances.

In a few hours, a soiree would commence. He was hosting a gathering so his friends could meet Hunter’s bride, Hannah. It was the party to which Warwick had invited Wilhelmina during the mad afternoon where they’d rolled around the city in his carriage. It had been a fleeting encounter that had ended so swiftly it might have been a dream.

Hunter was in the room with them, and they were sharing a brandy with their father, so it was a rare occasion. They seldom saw him, especially not the two of them together, so it was pleasant, but peculiar.

Neville was sitting at the desk, and Warwick and Hunter were slouched in chairs across from him. Hannah was upstairs resting, her tummy upset, and Warwick

had eavesdropped on the housemaids whispering that she might be in the family way.

Had that possibility occurred to Hunter? He'd been the most lecherous bachelor in London, but he'd gleefully retired to the country with Hannah. They were carrying on quietly and contentedly, and the change in his brother was so strange and so inexplicable—and it had transpired so rapidly—that the universe felt out of balance.

He and Hunter were army veterans, were tough, driven ex-soldiers who'd wallowed in the company of men. When women were permitted into their tight circle, it had been for carnal purposes. He and his brother had reveled in the demimonde, with the most wicked slatterns they could find. They'd relished naughty tarts, the naughtier the better, so how could Hunter have abandoned it so easily?

With practically no debate, he'd wed Hannah, then had altered his entire existence. For her. To make her happy.

The scenario that had ensnared Hunter—the loving marriage, the boisterous children that would eventually arrive—was so at odds with the sort of person Warwick had deemed Hunter to be that he couldn't decide how to view it.

Would Hunter thrive in that small, quiet world? Currently, he was walking on air. It left Warwick optimistic over his own marital fate. Hunter had stumbled on Hannah nearly by accident. If he could achieve such a fantastical conclusion, what were the chances that Warwick could do the same?

"These are the first details I've heard about your nuptial foray," Hunter said, "and it seems it was a disaster. What happened?"

"Nothing happened," Warwick said, as Neville said, "He completely embarrassed himself."

Hunter laughed. "Which is it?"

Warwick leapt in before Neville could. "I went to Hill Haven to assess Mrs. Milton's daughter, and the girl was totally inappropriate."

"Don't listen to him," Neville said. "She would have been perfect, and he's being ridiculous."

Warwick ignored his father and said to Hunter, "While I was there, I crossed paths with a fascinating female."

"Whom he seduced in front of his hostess!" Neville added.

"I didn't seduce her!" Warwick seethed. "She and I were simply cordial, but Mrs. Milton assumed—incorrectly—that I'd been coaxed away from her daughter. Afterward, Father wrote to Mrs. Milton to complain that she'd allowed a temptress to

lure me to my doom.”

“I didn’t call her a temptress,” Neville said. “I believe the word I used was *trollop*.”

“You wrote a letter to Mrs. Milton?” Hunter asked Neville. “Why would you care about one of us committing a romantic foible? Why would you bestir yourself over it? Are you feeling all right?”

“Your brother has to marry,” Neville said, “just as you married, and just as Sheridan will have to pick someone the minute he’s home. Warwick can’t reject a suitable candidate merely because he was obsessed with a doxy.”

Hunter snorted at that and asked Warwick, “Was she a doxy?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Who was this captivating siren?”

“She wasn’t a siren. She was simply exotic and unusual.” Facetiously, he claimed, “I could barely resist her, but I managed to control myself.”

“Uh-oh,” Hunter said. “You sound very much how *I* sounded after I met Hannah. Are there wedding bells in your future?”

Warwick froze, the prospect riveting him. He’d once pondered marriage to Wilhelmina, but in a vague and negative way. He was supposed to search for a contender with the proper ancestry, station, and breeding. A hefty dowry would be expected too. Wilhelmina didn’t fit the bill by any of those standards, but for a wild instant, he wondered why that had to be the case.

Why heed his father? Why proceed according to the stupid rules set down by society?

Well, he knew the answer to that question. Down through the centuries, it had been proved over and over that like should stick to like. When disparate people attached themselves, it always ended in catastrophe.

He didn’t want the world to work like that, but it did. He was fixated on Wilhelmina, but he’d engaged in too many dalliances, and he recognized how they flared, how they burned out. He was certain that most of his attraction was being fueled by the fact that she was off-limits to him.

If he could get her alone for a few weeks, to enjoy some debauched mischief, he had no doubt his passion would be quickly quelled.

“I’m not marrying her,” Warwick said, “so I have no idea why Neville is in such a snit about it. Or why he’d contact Mrs. Milton.”

“I was curious as to her version of what had occurred,” Neville said.

“Have I mentioned that she is a rude harpy? Why would you consider her opinion to be valid on any topic?”

“She was never rude to me,” Neville said. “She and I are old friends.”

Hunter rolled his eyes. “It means he had an affair with her.”

Neville didn’t have friendships with women. He viewed every female as sexual chattel, available to feed his insatiable appetite for decadence.

“Could we focus on the subject at hand?” Warwick said.

“What is it?” Neville asked.

“Don’t interfere in my life. Don’t write letters about me as if I’ve misbehaved at school and need a thrashing.”

“I’m trying to ease you down the road to wedded bliss.”

Warwick and Hunter guffawed with derision, and Hunter said to Neville, “That just might be the most ludicrous comment you’ve ever uttered in my presence.”

“I want Warwick to be happy,” Neville said, “and I’m convinced that, eventually, Cassandra Milton would have made him happy.”

“You have no evidence to support your supposition,” Warwick told him, “so I’m fearing for your rational wits. Are you growing senile on us?”

“I know more about love and romance than you do,” his father said. “I especially know more about matrimony.”

“You had two failed marriages,” Warwick said, “so you shouldn’t pretend to be an expert.”

Hunter said to Warwick, “You still haven’t shared any information about this paragon who enticed you. Who was she?”

“Her name is Wilhelmina Dobbs. Her father was the famous artist, Jefferson Dobbs.”

“My goodness. Why was she at Hill Haven? Was she a guest?”

“She lives there. Blanche Milton is a cousin, and she gave her a cottage and a studio. She paints—like her father.”

Hunter was vastly amused. “You fell for a doxy who paints?”

There was a hint of scorn in Hunter’s voice, and Warwick was incredibly irked. Hunter’s wife, Hannah, had owned a bookshop when they’d wed, so it was hypocritical for him to scoff at any female who was walking an odd path.

“I repeat: She’s not a doxy,” Warwick snapped, “and she’s quite brilliant.”

Neville butted in with, “Now you grasp, Hunter, why I inserted myself in the debacle. If I hadn’t put my foot down, he might have demanded to betroth himself to

the peculiar girl. Her father was an up-jumped portrait painter who was half-mad besides! It boggles the mind. It really does.”

“Neville!” Hunter scolded. “Don’t be such an ass. I’m sensing that Warwick was very fond of her.”

“The operative word in your sentence is *was*,” Neville said. “He *was* fond of her, but that drivel has ended. He thought about his obsession and realized he was being absurd. Shortly, we’ll start another search. He didn’t like Cassandra Milton, so we’ll find someone else.”

Hunter looked at Warwick and asked, “Is Neville correct? Are you over her?”

“Of course I’m over her,” Warwick lied. “No woman could hold my attention to the point where I’d grow infatuated.”

“See?” Neville said to Hunter, appearing very smug. “My sons are not a mystery to me. I understand the three of you better than you understand yourselves.”

Warwick stared at his father, his expression blank.

Blanche and Cassandra Milton were in London and tarrying for the week, then they’d head to Hill Haven. Would Wilhelmina return with them? If she was planning on it, could she be persuaded not to accompany them? Could she be coaxed into loafing a bit longer?

Then and there, he decided to write her and inquire.



“WHY ARE YOU HERE?”

Cassandra gaped at Wilhelmina and said, “You’re not the only one who loves London. I’m trapped in the country—as you are. Mother suggested we come too, and I wasn’t about to dissuade her.”

“But why now? Can’t I have a single interval away without you trailing after me?”

Cassandra shrugged. “She received invitations to numerous parties. Because of the Royal Exhibition? Her friends are hosting soirees for the artists, and she couldn’t bear to miss out.”

“You’re not simply trying to annoy me beyond my limit?”

“Trust me, Wilhelmina, when we arranged the trip, we never considered your opinion.”

It was afternoon already, and they were in the dining room at Blanche's town house, seated at the table. Wilhelmina was dressed and about to depart for the Royal Exhibition, while Cassandra had just staggered out of bed and was having a very late breakfast. She was being so lazy that she'd actually traipsed down in her nightgown and robe.

Wilhelmina would spend her hours yawning over tedious paintings. Cassandra would shop and revel. Why else would a young lady travel to the city?

Since they'd arrived the prior evening, Blanche had sent out dozens of calling cards. They'd gotten replies for a supper, a musicale, several afternoon teas, and a ball on Saturday night.

As the day went on, they would probably garner even more invitations. She would make Blanche accept each one, and if her mother declared herself too exhausted to keep up with Cassandra's busy schedule, Cassandra would force Wilhelmina to tag along.

With Wilhelmina's father having been so famous, she knew many of the best people, and they'd stop to chat. It meant Cassandra would be able to socialize with a completely different and more elevated group.

Blanche never liked Wilhelmina to be included in any event, but Cassandra wasn't bothered by it. Even if Wilhelmina wasn't acquainted with anyone at a gathering, all the men focused on her, so when Cassandra was with her, she gained more notice too.

She was so happy!

She leaned nearer and murmured, "Mother intends to meet with Neville Stone. Lord Swindon? Remember Warwick Stone? Lord Swindon is his father."

Wilhelmina scowled. "Why would she talk to him?"

"She's angry about Warwick spurning me, and she plans to discuss the situation with him. She believes he can persuade Warwick to have me after all."

"Would you like him to be persuaded? Were you enchanted by Mr. Stone? From your blasé attitude when he was visiting, I couldn't tell."

"I can take him or leave him," she said. "I'd just like my betrothal to be settled."

"Were you aware that I was friendly with Mr. Stone?"

"Mother mentioned it, but with how she drones on and on, I didn't listen."

"I sketched him, and when we were together, he waxed on quite effusively. He was bored in the country, and he didn't like you or the estate."

Cassandra huffed. "He did *not* say that. He'd never have been that rude."

"He was very candid, so I doubt Blanche could have any effect on his decision."

"She can be relentless. I wouldn't be surprised if she fixes it."

"What if it works out and you wind up married to Mr. Stone, but his father and brother live forever. Mr. Stone would never become an earl, and you'd never be a countess."

Cassandra hated to have Wilhelmina raise the issue. "If I have to go to the trouble of shackling myself, and I can't have a title at the end, what's the point?"

"Maybe you should request that Blanche forget about Mr. Stone."

Wilhelmina stared in that penetrating way she had. They were only two years apart in age, but her cousin seemed so much older. And of course, due to Cassandra's little *lapse* with Jefferson, Wilhelmina thought she held the moral high ground in every circumstance.

Her snooty superiority always gave Cassandra a headache, and her head had been throbbing before she'd come downstairs. Robert had supplied her with two bottles of his mother's elixir to tide her over while she was away, and she'd drunk them both after she was in bed.

She relished the languor the tonic provided, but the following morning, her condition was horrid. The sole cure was more of the same, but she didn't have another bottle. Robert was a pest about doling it out in small amounts, and he insisted his mother would be suspicious if he stole too much at once.

He refused to confide where she bought the elixir, so Cassandra couldn't order any of her own. When she was shopping, she would ask clerks if they knew where the remedy could be purchased.

She stood, the quick motion making her dizzy, and she went over to a sideboard where there was a liquor tray tucked out of sight in the cabinet below. She grabbed a decanter that turned out to be whiskey and brought it to the table.

There was a footman hovering in the corner, waiting to be of assistance, and he watched her with a stoic expression. He wouldn't dare comment, but Wilhelmina always blurted out whatever was on her mind.

Cassandra added a huge dollop to her cup of tea, and Wilhelmina said, "Isn't it a tad early to start imbibing?"

"My head is pounding as if there's an anvil inside it. This will help, so don't nag. I get enough badgering from Mother."

Wilhelmina was scornful. "Are you drowning your guilty conscience? That's what it seems like to me."

Cassandra glanced at the footman, then bristled. "Why would I have a guilty conscience? As you're aware, I live an exemplary life, and I regret nothing."

Wilhelmina smirked with disdain. "No, you never rue or regret, do you?"

Her cousin jumped up and marched out, and Cassandra said, "Where are you going?"

"To the Exhibition. I can't guess when I'll be back."

"Mother and I have been invited to a supper, so we won't be here this evening. You'll have to fend for yourself."

"Good. I'm not in the mood to dine with either of you."

Wilhelmina swept out, and Cassandra listened as she exited the house. Then it was quiet again.

The footman was still dawdling, trying to be invisible, and Cassandra ignored him. She downed her tea so she would have an excuse to refill the cup with whiskey. She sipped the second serving more slowly, as she pondered the approaching week.

She wondered what sort of gentlemen she'd meet over the next few days. Might one of them be Holden Drake? She vaguely remembered flirting with him in the garden at Hill Haven. Hadn't they been embracing? She was positive they had been, so obviously, he was smitten. She ought to have her mother inquire about his schedule so they could show up at some of the same events where he'd be present.

What about Warwick Stone? Might she bump into him? Did she *want* to bump into him? No. He was stuffy and boring, and he didn't like her, so she didn't like him.

Blanche worried that Cassandra was already twenty-three, that time was slipping by and she was falling into spinster territory. She was also concerned that, with further delay, Cassandra's scandal might leak out, but it had transpired so far in the past that it might have happened to someone else.

The only people who knew about her disgrace were Edna Stewart and Wilhelmina, and Blanche had boxed them in with support and lodging so they would never tattle. With their being muzzled, how could she be found out?

Yes, Cassandra's secret was safe forever. Of that fact, she had no doubt at all.



BLANCHE STARED AT THE dancers promenading down the center of the room. Cassandra was one of them, and Blanche slyly observed her to check on her physical condition. Her daughter's color and spirits were high, and she appeared very fetching. Her partner was definitely enjoying himself.

Blanche was debating some gossip that had been whispered by the housekeeper. Should it be deemed specious or not? Apparently, Cassandra was drinking heavily, and her maid was incensed at having to deal with the situation. The girl was growing afraid Cassandra might get herself in trouble and the maid would be blamed.

Blanche scoffed at the idea of Cassandra misbehaving. She'd had some prior problems, when she'd been naught but a child, really, and Jefferson had taken advantage of her naïveté.

The debacle had been horrendous, but they'd staggered through it, and Cassandra had learned her lesson. She'd discovered how swiftly a female could tumble off the moral path, and she'd sworn to Blanche that she would never be reckless in the future. Her vow had provided Blanche with the strength she'd needed to forgive her.

No, she couldn't be drinking. Blanche refused to believe it.

The place was packed, the air hot and stale, and she was thinking she might step outside to cool down, but before she could move, a woman nearby murmured quite excitedly, "That's her. Cassandra Milton? She's the girl in the pink gown."

Blanche stiffened with surprise. She and Cassandra weren't exactly strangers to London society, but they didn't cut a swath that would have others snickering and spreading rumors.

She was partially concealed by a potted plant, and she peeked around to see who had spoken. It was Rowena Smithwaite, chatting with a companion. Initially, when she'd visited Hill Haven, she'd seemed like a charming guest, but gradually, Blanche had begun to suspect she was a bit of a tart.

She'd come with Lord Drake, so Blanche had had to welcome her. What would the beautiful widow impart to her acquaintance? Whatever it was, Blanche didn't suppose it would be to Cassandra's benefit.

"I'm stunned that she'd dare to show her face in town," Mrs. Smithwaite said

to her friend.

“What did she do? Was it terrible? Will I be shocked?”

“She had a child out of wedlock!” Mrs. Smithwaite practically crowed the news. “She was sixteen or seventeen. To hide the disaster, her family sent her to Scotland for the birthing, then she returned home and carried on as if nothing had occurred.”

The revelation was so accurate, and so unexpected, that Blanche had to clap a palm over her mouth so her gasp of astonishment wasn’t audible.

“Who was the father?” the friend asked. “Was his identity divulged? Or is she such a slattern that it could have been a stable boy?”

They laughed derisively, and Mrs. Smithwaite said, “It was that famous portraitist, Jefferson Dobbs. Remember him? He’s some sort of cousin, and he was staying with them.”

“Clearly, he was *close* to his relatives. At least with one of them anyway.”

“And listen to this: She spit out a healthy son, then dumped him on Mr. Dobbs’ daughter. The poor woman is raising him, and she pretends that *she* is his mother, rather than Miss Milton. She has a ruined reputation, when in fact, she is completely innocent.”

“No! I’m astounded she would agree to such a squalid arrangement. Why is Miss Milton here in town and prancing about on the dance floor? She’s acting as if she’s a pristine virgin who’s ripe for the plucking.”

They studied Cassandra, their focus rude and insulting.

“Who is her current partner?” the friend asked. “Is he a suitor? Perhaps we should whisper in his ear to be careful.”

“He could absolutely be a swain,” Mrs. Smithwaite said. “She’s in the middle of a determined marital search, with her mother constantly hosting parties for various candidates. So far, none of them has been interested, but there are probably dozens of gentlemen who should be warned. Why, even Warwick Stone has been introduced to her! Can you imagine the scandal it would have stirred if he’d wed her, then had learned of it later on?”

“How did *you* find out about it?” the other woman asked.

“You will not believe how it came to light . . .”

They sauntered off and were swallowed up by the crowd, so Blanche heard no more. She was so distressed that she was weak in the knees, as if she might faint. She stumbled over to an empty chair and eased down.

Six years! Six long years, they'd kept the fiasco quiet. Who had told?

The circle of people who knew the truth was so small. *She* hadn't breathed a word and never would. Cassandra wouldn't either. Wilhelmina and Edna Stewart had too much to lose, so it wouldn't have been them. Might it have been a servant? Could it be? Had some sharp-eyed housemaid eavesdropped when she shouldn't have?

Blanche had convinced herself that they'd been clever and discreet, but evidently, she'd been wrong to assume they were safe. She yearned to run after Mrs. Smithwaite, to grab her arm and demand she confide the name of the culprit who'd tattled.

She anxiously hoped Mrs. Smithwaite wouldn't tell anyone else, but it was likely a futile wish. Londoners thrived on gossip, and this was a tale that, once disseminated, could never be tamped down.

The dance ended, and Blanche needed to rush out and inform Cassandra that they had to leave immediately, but she was frozen in her spot. With rumors flying, Cassandra shouldn't be so visible. If she went home, there would be no reason to talk about her, and Blanche would be able to regroup and devise a plan to emerge from catastrophe.

Yes, Blanche had to yank Cassandra out of the ballroom, then, in the morning, they would pack their bags and flee to Hill Haven. They would hide out, and Blanche would pray that, after Cassandra vanished, no one would mention her again. But at the moment, she doubted they would be that lucky.

The walls of her world, the ones she'd meticulously erected to keep Cassandra from total destruction, were collapsing onto her, the bricks hitting her painfully when they landed.

The musicians started playing, the next set beginning. Cassandra was still out on the floor, laughing and smiling at a new partner. Blanche had been too stunned to whisk Cassandra away, and she couldn't interrupt now. She could only watch her daughter march with the line of dancers.

Was it Blanche's imagination or was the story already spreading like wildfire? Were guests tittering and furtively pointing? How much damage might Mrs. Smithwaite inflict before she was finished?

Chapter Fifteen



"YOU'RE LEAVING? NOW?"

"Yes."

Wilhelmina gaped at Blanche. They were in her bedchamber, and Blanche was cramming clothes into a traveling trunk, without waiting for a housemaid to assist her. She was that determined to depart.

It was early morning, just after eight. Wilhelmina was up and had been about to have breakfast, when she'd walked by Blanche's room and had seen her in a frenzy. She and Cassandra had stayed out late, and Wilhelmina had been asleep when they'd arrived home. She'd awoken to chaos.

"What happened?" Wilhelmina asked.

Blanche stepped in so they were toe to toe, and she lowered her volume to an angry hiss. "Who did you tell about Cassandra?"

Wilhelmina stiffened with offense. "Why would you accuse me of that? And *who* would I tell? No one is interested in the skeletons in our family's closet."

"Swear to me that it wasn't you!"

"It wasn't! I swear!"

Yet a quiet voice reminded her that she'd confessed the whole sordid story to Warwick. She couldn't think of who else might care enough to repeat gossip.

Wilhelmina had expected the facts to come out someday. It wasn't the sort of scandal that could be tamped down permanently, and Wilhelmina's only regret was that problems would arise at Hill Haven. Her life muddled along at a slow pace, and if an explosion was about to occur, she didn't want the cause to be Cassandra's amour with Wilhelmina's father.

Evidently, Wilhelmina's denial had been convincing. Blanche eased away and said, "I believe you, but who could it have been. You don't suppose it was Edna?"

"Why would she tattle? She would never jeopardize our security. She likes our

cottage too much.”

Blanche reflected, then nodded. “It must have been a servant. They always discover things they shouldn’t.”

“You still haven’t told me what happened.”

“We were at a party last night, and I heard some women talking. It was that trollop, Rowena Smithwaite. Remember her? She visited us, with Mr. Stone and Lord Drake.”

Wilhelmina displayed no reaction. “Yes, I remember her. She stopped by my studio with Lord Drake. She was very proud; I didn’t like her.”

It was another remark that was spot-on. Blanche nodded again. “She knew about Cassandra and about . . . well . . . Scotland and everything!”

“My goodness. Were you able to glean how she learned of it?”

“No, she and her friend sauntered off before I could.”

It sounded as if Warwick had broken his promise to remain silent. He and Mrs. Smithwaite were cordial, so it must have been him. Was Wilhelmina surprised? No. He bragged about being a cad. By their very nature, weren’t cads untrustworthy?

“You’re going home?” Wilhelmina said.

“Yes.” Blanche whipped away and marched out and down the hall. She pounded on Cassandra’s door. “Cassandra! Get up! The carriage is being harnessed, so we’re leaving in fifteen minutes.”

Wilhelmina watched from a safe distance as Blanche knocked over and over. Finally, Cassandra peeked out. She looked like death-warmed-over, as if she was suffering the worst hangover in history. She was in her nightgown and robe, her eyes bloodshot, her hair tangled.

“Gad, Mother,” she said, “why must you raise such a ruckus?”

“If you’re not dressed when I’m ready,” Blanche fumed, “I will have the footmen carry you out in your nightclothes. You can complete the journey, attired like an invalid.”

Blanche stormed to the stairs and tromped down, calling for the servants to fetch her trunks, to pack her a basket of food. Cassandra hovered, and Wilhelmina flashed a conspiratorial smile, hoping it signaled a bit of commiseration.

She despised her cousin, but they shared a common opinion that they hated it when Blanche was in a temper. Cassandra didn’t smile in return, but shut the door with a firm click. Wilhelmina followed Blanche. She was in the dining room, eating a scone, not bothering to sit. The staff was flitting in and out, trying to stay out of her

way.

“What about . . . ah . . . the rumor situation?” Wilhelmina asked.

“I predict, if we vanish to the country, no one will ponder us again. It should die down quickly.”

“I’m sure that will work.”

“After all, who cares about *us*? We’re merely a small family, from a rural property. Why would our paltry issues stir any stories?”

“Exactly.” Wilhelmina couldn’t deduce if Blanche was stating what she truly believed or if she was persuading herself. “I might bump into Mrs. Smithwaite. Would you like me to press her for information? I could inquire as to how she found out.”

“Don’t you dare! I won’t have you mentioning the topic. Not to anyone!”

Wilhelmina didn’t think the chatter would magically disappear. It was too juicy and just the sort of wretched tale that bored Londoners loved to repeat. They didn’t have anything better to do than titter and vent.

“Will you ride home with us?” Blanche asked. “There’s plenty of space.”

What could be more odious? Besides, a wicked idea was forming, and she was simply anxious for Blanche to depart so she could have some peace and quiet to debate whether she should proceed or not.

“The Royal Exhibition is still open,” she said, “so I’m eager to spend as much time there as I can. In fact, I might even tarry an extra week or two. I haven’t been to town in ages, and I’d like to behave like a tourist. I can’t imagine when I’ll be back, so I should visit some museums and attend the theater.”

A footman peered in and advised that the carriage had pulled up and that Blanche’s trunks and food had been loaded.

Blanche stomped to the foyer, yelling up the stairs, “Cassandra! Stop dawdling!”

They all froze, praying the blasted girl would obey so Blanche didn’t rush up and drag her out. Ultimately, Cassandra shouted, “I’m coming, I’m coming. Cease your yammering! My head is about to explode!”

She staggered down, her voice ragged, her condition bedraggled. She continued on to the door and lurched outside. Blanche trudged after her, and they climbed into the vehicle. Neither of them said goodbye, but Wilhelmina wasn’t offended. She hadn’t wanted them in London in the first place, and she was thrilled to see them go.

Their driver clicked the reins, and they rolled away. Wilhelmina stood on the

stoop, observing as they lumbered down the street. She wondered what would happen next. With Cassandra's secret revealed, disaster was approaching. What would it be? How might it impact Wilhelmina?

Cassandra's difficulties were her own, and Wilhelmina probably should have been more concerned about the ramifications, but she wouldn't fret over them.

She spun and went into the house. The air was unsettled, the energy roiling from their hasty exit. She walked to the dining room and sat down, and she poured herself some tea and slathered butter on a muffin. She considered various aspects of her idea, considered some more, then decided on her path.

Why shouldn't she try it? Blanche had fled, so who was there to prevent her?

She strolled to the kitchen where the butler was having a furtive conversation with the servants. The residence was usually shuttered, so they were mostly caretakers, with the family always at Hill Haven. Since they weren't around Blanche that much, they'd likely forgotten about her temper. When they saw Wilhelmina, they straightened and struggled to look as if they hadn't been gossiping.

"I need to send another message and have it conveyed to the recipient right away," she said. "I'll just dash up to my bedchamber to write it. Is there a footman available?"

"Yes, of course," the butler said. "We can have it delivered immediately."



WARWICK WAS EATING BREAKFAST. It would be a lazy day, so he was in no hurry. He'd been out until dawn, gambling and generally being obnoxious with his disgusting friends, and it was noon already.

Was he bored? Was he wishing he had important activities to occupy his time? He'd been in the army for years, and he fondly recollected that busy, wild experience, where there had been vital tasks to complete.

He was a rich, indolent fellow who never had any responsibilities to fill his schedule. He had tons of money and smart accountants to manage it, so he didn't have to bother with it. He didn't own a country estate, so he didn't have to worry about keeping it in stellar shape. He could simply loaf and carouse.

Shouldn't there be more to life than that? He was twenty-nine. Shouldn't he be changing the world or making a difference?

The fact that he would contemplate such a ridiculous question had him realizing he was terribly morose. He was never sad, so what was wrong?

Before he could delve to the answer, a footman carried in the morning post. He sifted through the pile of invitations to suppers, dances, and occasionally to more debauched revels, arranged by his rowdier acquaintances.

With his father's startling elevation, the size of the mound had increased substantially. Every parent with a marriageable daughter was keen to have him stop by. Most of those requests, he tossed in the fire without a reply.

At the bottom of the stack, there was a final note, and when he recognized the handwriting, he grinned from ear to ear. Like a bird freed from its cage, he flicked the seal, his excitement almost too much to bear.

Blanche and Cassandra went home early, so I am in London by myself. Is your invitation to socialize still available? Shall we meet?

He threw down his napkin, calling for his carriage to be harnessed, for his coat to be brought. All of it took much too long, and he paced in the foyer, waiting for his driver to pull up.

Once the vehicle arrived, he leapt in and headed off, hoping against hope that he hadn't missed her. He couldn't have her think he wasn't interested.

They halted at the building where the Royal Exhibition was being held. He was delayed further as he tarried in line to purchase a ticket, then he raced inside and up the stairs to the salon where he'd bumped into her previously.

As he reached the upper floor, he was nearly tiptoeing. If she'd left, if she'd assumed he hadn't wanted to come, he'd be so disappointed.

He peeked in and . . .

There she was! She must have heard him, for she spun toward him, her smile lighting up the room.

"Am I late?" he asked.

"No, and I always love a man who's right on time."



"I'M NERVOUS."

"Why would you be?"

Wilhelmina glared at Warwick and said, "I'm about to be introduced to your

brother and perhaps your father—the grand and glorious, Earl of Swindon—who has declared he doesn't like me.”

“First of all, my father is neither grand nor glorious. He is an amiable wastrel who's never worked a minute in his life. And second, it's not that he doesn't *like* you. He didn't like your father, and he's afraid you might be just as mad as he was.”

“He was quite unhinged, and so am I, so your father probably should worry.”

“I'm not sure he'll be present, but if he is, I expect you to charm him so he understands why I'm besotted.”

They were in Warwick's carriage, snuggled together on the seat. His brother, Hunter, was hosting a soiree at their father's house. When Warwick had asked her to accompany him, she'd debated for hours, then had agreed. It wasn't exactly inappropriate for her to be with him. She was an adult who set her own schedule and picked her own activities. If she wanted to attend an at-home, she could do that.

There were people who might frown on her choice though. After all, doxies traveled about with bachelors. Daxies went to parties unchaperoned, but with Blanche having fled for Hill Haven, there was no one to notice or protest.

And it wasn't an illicit gathering. Warwick's family was old aristocracy, his father an earl, and his brother a viscount. He and his wife were heading to their country property the next morning, so if Wilhelmina was to meet them, it had to be that evening.

She was pushing her luck, but couldn't help it. By her strutting in on Warwick's arm, it would seem as if they were courting or as if she was his fiancée. She wasn't his betrothed, so she was stepping over many lines that shouldn't be crossed.

The determinative aspect that had convinced her to tag along was the caliber of the guests. They would be his and his brother's friends, those from their boarding school years and with whom they'd served in the army. She yearned to witness this side of him, and she was much more curious than she should have been about it.

She was curious about his father too. She liked to flaunt herself to superior men who thought they were better than her, and if Lord Swindon was an ass? Well, she'd blustered through the courts of Europe, watching the great ladies put gentlemen in their places. She knew precisely how it was accomplished.

“Lord Drake might be here,” Warwick said, yanking her out of her reverie.

“Then there will be one familiar face. Will he remember me?”

“Trust me, he definitely will. You're unforgettable.”

“If you continue uttering comments like that, I might start to believe you.”

She sighed with exasperation. "Our furtive relationship was easier to pursue in the room behind my studio."

"No, it wasn't. My anxiety flared every minute, as I was certain Mrs. Milton would catch us. I'm so glad I didn't get you into a jam with her."

She hadn't mentioned why Blanche had run away: because Mrs. Smithwaite had been spreading rumors about Cassandra. He'd promised he would keep Wilhelmina's secret, and if she didn't inquire, she could pretend he hadn't reneged on that vow.

The carriage rattled to a halt, and they climbed out and stared up at his father's house. It was an ostentatious mansion, three stories high, with a curved driveway and wide stairs that led up to ornate double doors.

"What do you think?" he asked her. "It's a monstrosity, isn't it?"

"Fancy, fancy. You've bragged about being rich, but apparently, I had no idea."

"I didn't earn any of it. I had a very shrewd ancestor who had a tradesman's brain for commerce. He accumulated a fortune, and we've always hired skilled accountants. They rope in our worst tendencies so we don't squander it."

The windows on the main floor were ablaze from the chandeliers, and there was a huge crowd inside.

"You said it would be a small event," she grumbled.

He shrugged. "We know everybody who matters."

"Don't lose track of me, and don't let me be cornered by any idiots."

"Are you joking? The sole *idiot* who will corner you is me. I'd be much too jealous to allow any other fellow to get close."

They went in, and he escorted her into a large parlor that was packed to the rafters. There was no receiving line or announcement of new arrivals. It was much too casual for that, which was a relief. If they'd been announced, it would have looked as if they were a dedicated couple, with marriage in mind. As it was, they wedged themselves into the mob, and they weren't noticed.

They wandered through the various salons, with Warwick stopping occasionally to chat. No one was surprised that he'd brought a female companion, and it forced her to recollect that he was a notorious cad. Most likely, he regularly brought slatterns to parties, and she had to hope she wasn't presumed to be a slattern too.

After an enormous amount of searching, they finally found his brother and his wife, Lord and Lady Marston. The two brothers were enough alike to be twins. They were so handsome and masculine, and suddenly, she was dying to paint them. All that

virile magnetism would ooze off the canvas.

Lady Marston, Hannah, was petite and pretty, with curly chestnut hair and big green eyes. She appeared cordial and happy, and it was clear she and her husband were blatantly in love. Their joy hovered in the air around them, and on observing it, Wilhelmina suffered an unusual burst of envy.

She'd convinced herself that she was content to be alone, but might she have been wrong about that?

"You're Wilhelmina Dobbs?" Viscount Marston said. "I've definitely heard a lot about you recently."

"That news alarms me," she replied.

"Aren't you the temptress who nearly lured my naïve, innocent sibling to his doom?"

The Viscountess elbowed him in the ribs. "Behave, Hunter. Your rude comments will embarrass her, and we're trying to make a good impression."

Wilhelmina gaped at Warwick. "What on earth have you been telling them about me?"

"Only that you're fascinating and exotic. It's rare to stumble on someone so interesting, so I've had to boast about you."

"My father is the one complaining," Lord Marston told her. "He thinks Warwick is still ten and shouldn't be permitted to pick his own friends."

"Hunter!" his wife said. "Be silent."

"It's all right, Hannah," Warwick said. "I already informed her about Father and how ridiculous he was being."

Lady Marston smiled at Wilhelmina and said, "If you're around this pair of scoundrels very much, you will quickly learn that they have a very strange relationship with their father."

"I had a strange relationship with my own father," Wilhelmina said, "so I can't chastise others for how they get on with theirs."

"Is Neville here?" Warwick asked his brother.

"Not that I've seen." Lord Marston grinned at Wilhelmina. "If you bump into him, please give his ego a smack down. Since his elevation, he carries on as if he's the smartest man in the kingdom, and it's obvious you could bring him down a peg or two."

"If I have the chance, I shall give it my all—just for you."

They didn't have opportunity for much more than that brief conversation.

People were sauntering up, eager to be introduced to Lady Marston.

Wilhelmina and Warwick meandered away. They ate and talked, danced and sat in quiet corners. At Hill Haven, they'd typically been locked in her studio, so the current event was incredibly intriguing.

He was charming and funny, and she might have been falling under a wicked spell. Shortly, she'd return to the country. How would she bear the pain of parting from him once again?

She would spend every second with him before she departed. Hopefully, after she left, she would have filled up a box of precious memories that would keep her satisfied forever.



NEVILLE STOOD ON THE verandah of his town house. He was smoking a cheroot and wondering if it might rain. The rooms inside were packed with young revelers, so he'd snuck in the back, not wanting to interrupt their merriment.

Normally, he'd have been gambling at *Ralston's*, but there'd been a kerfuffle among some of the hot-headed dandies. After the troublemakers had been ejected, the excitement had waned, and he'd slithered home. The whole debacle had him feeling nostalgic. He was ruminating over the paramours he should have cherished, the friends he'd never valued, the bastard children he'd ignored.

He had a few of them scattered around England, and his mood was so low that he was kicking himself for being an awful father, an awful person.

Before he could grow too maudlin, a woman came outside and leaned on the balustrade. She was extremely beautiful, slender and lithe, with white-blond hair and the most striking eyes. Attired in an exquisite lavender gown, she could have been a princess in a fairytale, the sort of fey creature who could place a man under an enchantment and lead him to his doom.

She glanced over and noticed him evaluating her, and she didn't blanch under his heightened assessment. If anything, she accepted it as her due. What a divine goddess! Who could she be?

He tossed his cheroot into the grass and strolled over.

"I don't believe we've met," he said. "I'm Lord Swindon, and I assume you're a friend of my sons, but which one? Hunter or Warwick? Or have you accompanied

some other gentleman entirely?"

"I'm a friend of Warwick's." Her voice was husky and sensual, as if she was an experienced courtesan who might invite him to her bedchamber. "I'm surprised to stumble on you out here. Why are you hiding?"

"It's a gathering for youngsters. I didn't suppose I should ruin everyone's fun."

She snorted at that. "We probably could have tolerated your presence. It's your house, isn't it? It means we have to be polite to you."

"You are so familiar to me. Do I know you?"

"No, but I'd recognize you anywhere. You look just like your boys."

"I will take that as a compliment. How are you acquainted with Warwick?"

She smirked disdainfully. "I'm Wilhelmina Dobbs." Then, almost as if in challenge, she added, "I'm betting that news will shock you."

"Ah . . . Miss Dobbs." He kept his expression blank. "With you revealing your identity, it's clear I should have guessed who you were. You're the spitting image of Jefferson."

"As *he* was a handsome, charming rascal, I will take that as a compliment as well."

"I wasn't aware you were in town."

"No, I don't figure you would have been."

"Will you be staying long?"

"Long enough."

He chuckled, but his curiosity and alarm were spiraling. What type of disaster was percolating? Should he write to Blanche again? Could Blanche summon her home?

"How did you cross paths with Warwick?" he asked. "I could have sworn your liaison had been severed."

"I'm here for the Royal Exhibition. I bumped into him—by accident—so you needn't fear he was scheming behind your back."

"Oh, I wasn't fearing that," he hurriedly claimed, so he sounded like an idiot.

She clucked her tongue with offense. "Blanche accosted me over the letter you sent to her. I wish you wouldn't have. Nothing happened between Warwick and me, and it simply aggravated us both."

His cheeks heated with chagrin. "I apologize for it. I shouldn't have contacted her, and if you were planning to scold me, you needn't bother. Warwick already unleashed a potent diatribe about my interfering ways."

"I wasn't about to scold you. Blanche shouted and complained about my flirting with Warwick, but I'm used to her tirades. I ignored her."

"In my own defense, I was merely being a father."

"I realize you were."

"I was worried he might have involved himself in a . . . a . . ."

He couldn't finish the sentence. He'd spent his life engaged in illicit amours, and his sons had adopted his wicked proclivities when they'd become adults. His randy habits had always been horrid, so he could hardly protest if they displayed the same vile tendencies.

He also couldn't choose a suitable word to describe what he'd been trying to prevent with Warwick and Miss Dobbs. By Warwick's accounting, she wasn't a trollop, so he couldn't treat her as if she was. If she'd been embedded in the demimonde, they could have discussed the kind of bond that would be appropriate for her to pursue with Warwick.

She would have grasped the parameters of what was permitted and what wasn't.

Her father, Jefferson, had destroyed himself with drink, tarts, and other vices, so Neville couldn't exactly deem her to be gently-bred. He couldn't fathom how she'd been raised or what morals might have been instilled. Who would have instilled them? Not Jefferson, that was for sure. What could Neville add that wouldn't be rude and pretentious?

She had mercy on him, laying a comforting palm on his wrist and saying, "Don't concern yourself, Lord Swindon. I'm leaving shortly, and I won't be back."

"Will you and Warwick correspond?"

"I have no desire to keep in touch with him."

Now that he'd spoken with her, he was wondering if he hadn't been hasty in judging her, and he definitely comprehended why Warwick had been smitten. She exuded a carnal languor that made a man ponder sexual encounters and erotic bed sport. How far had Warwick pushed matters?

Were they lovers? If they were, should Neville have an opinion about it?

His chief dread was that she would delay Warwick in his search for a bride. If Warwick asked Miss Dobbs to be his mistress again, might she agree? If she accepted his indecent proposal, he wouldn't be able to focus on the correct task. If he could fill his days—and nights—with fascinating Wilhelmina Dobbs, why chase debutantes?

"I'm disappointed to discover you won't tarry," he said.

She laughed. "No, you're not."

"I always like to befriend a pretty girl."

"So I've heard."

"I knew your father," he said.

"I heard that too."

"He and I ran in a fast crowd. I'd tell you stories, but they would make you blush."

"I traveled with my father for years, so there aren't many antics I didn't witness for myself. You couldn't embarrass me."

"By my penning that ridiculous letter to Blanche, you and I got off on the wrong foot. It's not that I don't want you to be cordial with Warwick."

"You absolutely don't want it," she had the audacity to state, "and I understand your reservations about me. I truly do."

"I never denigrated you to him." It was a bald-faced lie, but he uttered it anyway. "I wrote to Blanche because I was worried about why he'd developed such a heightened regard for you, but I have my answer. You're quite stunning, so it's apparent why."

"In the beginning, my regard for him was elevated too. When he first left, I was a tad morose, but I quickly moved on. You see, Lord Swindon, you don't believe that *I* am good enough for your son, but I have to say the same: I don't believe *he* is good enough for me. He's a cad and a bounder. He brags about it, and I could never be interested in a scoundrel."

"You told me, didn't you?"

"I was reared around men like you. In fact, my father was a lot like you, and early on, I learned to never let a pompous oaf insult me. I find such male posturing to be incredibly annoying."

She flashed a scathing look he felt clear down to his toes, then she sauntered away and went inside. Through the windows, he observed as she sashayed over to Warwick. She snuggled herself to him, and he slid an arm around her waist. Their intimate connection was blatant, powerful, and extremely obvious.

She whispered a comment in his ear, and Neville supposed it was about *him*. Warwick scowled, whispered a reply, then kissed her on the cheek. Right there in the parlor! That, in and of itself, was shocking. Then they gazed at one another, and they scoffed, seeming to read each other's mind and not needing to talk aloud.

"Oh, dear," Neville murmured, being astounded by their fondness.

He could plainly perceive it from where he was dawdling on the verandah, and he sighed with exasperation. The silly pair was desperately in love. Did Miss Dobbs realize it? Did Warwick? With their relationship soaring to that high level, how could it be ended? Should it be ended?

Genuine amour was so rare, but was it *genuine*? Neville was an incurable romantic. If Warwick was that deeply attached, wouldn't it be cruel to yank them apart? Wouldn't it be stupid to force him to settle for someone else, that being a boring, insipid ninny he didn't particularly like?

What if the worst occurred and Warwick wed Miss Dobbs? She had no ancestry worth mentioning, and her father had been a deranged lunatic. Those were huge detriments that couldn't be ignored. Yet if Warwick *loved* her . . .

What then?

"Wilhelmina Dobbs, Wilhelmina Stone," he mused, almost as if he was testing the sound of the name.

Was he ready for a new daughter-in-law? Could he bear for it to be Jefferson Dobbs' gorgeous, exotic daughter? Should it be her? If Warwick wanted her, who was Neville to tell him he couldn't have her?

Well, he was Warwick's father. Was he so modern and accommodating that he'd approve of the odd match? He doubted it, and if *he* didn't put his foot down, who would? But should he?

He had no idea.

Chapter Sixteen



"I'VE DECIDED TO HEAD home next Wednesday."

Wilhelmina peered over at Warwick, gauging his reaction to her announcement. It was Thursday, so her departure was six days away.

He was silent, pondering his reply, then he said, "I suppose it would be a waste of energy to beg you to stay longer than that."

"There's not a point to my staying. If I don't show up soon, people will wonder where I am."

"Wouldn't it be Blanche Milton who is annoyed? Do you care what she thinks?"

"It's not whether I care or not. I just wouldn't want to fight with her."

"Why would it cause a fight? I don't understand the parameters that rule your relationship."

"I pretend I'm free and independent, but no woman is truly free. I'm bound by my life at Hill Haven, and I would never engage in any conduct where she would suspect she's being too kind. If she thought I was having too much fun, she'd be incredibly aggravated."

"I would debate if her behavior should be called *kind*. In my view, every step she's taken has been manipulative and self-serving. She hemmed you in with a huge bag of lies."

Wilhelmina shrugged. "She opened her town house for me so I could come for the Royal Exhibition. She could have refused, but her generosity is not unlimited. The Exhibition closes on Saturday, and after it shuts down, I won't have an excuse to explain a delay in my returning."

They were seated in his carriage, and it was a chilly autumn night, so they were snuggled tight, a blanket over their laps and holding hands like a pair of adolescent sweethearts.

The vehicle was stopped in between his bachelor lodging and Blanche's residence. For the prior few evenings, she'd fibbed to Blanche's servants, claiming she was attending various events and traveling to them in rented hansom cabs. In reality, she would march out the front door and down the street, then meet him around the corner.

It was all very clandestine, which lent an air of sinfulness to their flirtation, but she couldn't be more candid. The staff was in regular communication with their counterparts at Hill Haven. None of them would consciously tattle about her, but she couldn't risk an inadvertent mention of her socializing—and that her escort was Warwick Stone.

Blanche had previously accused Wilhelmina of interfering in his courtship of Cassandra, and while Wilhelmina had vehemently rejected the allegation, she tried to never be a cruel person.

The news that she was pursuing a liaison with him would upset Blanche very much, and she never deliberately poked a stick at Blanche's temper. With Blanche being frantic about recent gossip and its impact on Cassandra's reputation, her irritation was on a sharp edge.

Wilhelmina wouldn't get herself into a spat with Blanche where Blanche might utter comments she didn't mean. That said, she wouldn't miss out on the most exciting, delicious interval that had occurred in her world in ages.

More and more, she sensed her father's wicked blood surging just below the surface. In the past, she'd tamped it down, but her fling with Warwick had dragged her to a spot where she was calculating the amount of mischief she could foment without it being detected.

It was growing colder by the minute, and she had to climb out and walk home. He would follow at a discreet distance to be sure she arrived safely, but as with every encounter they'd managed to steal for themselves, they were dawdling and couldn't bear for it to end.

She couldn't figure out how their friendship would resolve. She'd been warned away from him by Blanche and by his toplofty father, so it was dangerous to continue, but she couldn't desist. It was why she'd picked her Wednesday departure. If she hadn't selected a firm date, she'd have never left.

She took a deep breath, feeling as if she was running toward a cliff and about to jump off. Then she said, "I have to ask you a question. It's very scandalous, so I hope you won't faint."

"I'm a scandalous man, so I won't faint—or even be shocked. I promise."

"Please don't deem me to be loose either, but I *am* Jefferson Dobbs' daughter, and occasionally, I get wild urges I can't ignore."

He smirked. "This is sounding better and better, and you're aware of my opinion about loose women. If you'd like to be a tad *loose* with me, I'm all for it."

"I've been telling myself you'd view it that way."

She'd intended to simply blurt it out, but she suffered a spurt of nerves. He leaned in and nuzzled her nape, sending goosebumps down her arms.

"What is it?" he asked. "You've ignited my curiosity, so you can't back down now."

His encouragement provided some needed daring. "I'm leaving soon, and the hours will pass quickly."

"I agree."

She gulped with trepidation. "So . . . I was thinking we should sneak away to a private location for a few days. I'd like to go somewhere where we could hide and spend every second together in a more intimate fashion."

He froze, absorbing her proposal. She was a bit startled by it too. In her entire life, she'd never been so brazen. Females never behaved so shamelessly, not unless they were planning to enter the demimonde and remain there—which she wasn't.

She simply yearned for something marvelous to transpire. Down through the years, she'd worked hard to prove that she wasn't like her wanton father, but the pathetic fact was that she was exactly like him. For once, she would let her worst tendencies fly free.

Warwick Stone would be the perfect partner to bestow the sort of experience she was seeking. He would make it amazing, and she'd return to Hill Haven feeling more content, without being consumed by cravings she couldn't control.

"Are you asking me to have an affair with you?" he inquired.

"I guess that's what it would be: a very brief, very satisfying affair that we would both recall fondly."

"We would dally, then abruptly part forever?"

"Yes. From the night we met, you've bragged about being a cad, so you must have some idea of how a stealthy rendezvous is accomplished. I'm clueless as to how a gentleman arranges such an assignation. Might you have a country cottage we could use?"

His jaw dropped. "Are you serious?"

“Yes. I struggle frequently with melancholia, where I choke on my restricted life. When my father was alive, I reveled in my big existence, and I miss it. If I head home, and all I have to show for my time with you is a trip or two to the theater, I’ll never forgive myself.”

“I believe this is where I’m supposed to save you from yourself. I am duty-bound to talk you out of this.”

“I doubt you can, but if you’d rather not oblige me, I completely understand. We’ll pretend this conversation never happened.”

He snorted at that. “I said that I was *supposed* to talk you out of it. I didn’t declare that I would. If you’re determined to act like a tart, I am not the fellow who will dissuade you.”

“I wouldn’t picture myself as acting like a tart. I am so obsessed with you, and I simply need more of you than our current circumstance allows. I can’t deduce how to change that situation except to sneak away with you.”

He studied her, then asked, “How would we manage it? I can frolic in whatever manner tickles my fancy, but *you* have constraints. How would you shuck off the fetters that curb you?”

“I would write to Blanche and Edna to tell them I’ll be there on Wednesday. Then I’ll tell the servants here at the town house that I’m leaving tomorrow. They don’t have any reason to question my decision. I’ll pack my bags and go, and I’ll be able to disappear for a short period.”

“It’s a deranged notion. You realize that, don’t you?”

“Yes, I realize it.”

“And I’m not certain you’ve considered the ramifications of being locked away with me.”

“I’m not a green girl. I’m twenty-five and a spinster, and I’ve learned more about amour than an unwed lady probably should. I’m clear on what I want, and I *want* this.”

“I wouldn’t marry you afterward,” he announced like an idiot.

She clucked her tongue with offense. “Why do men always say exactly the wrong thing?”

“That was badly put. Let me rephrase my comment. If you were a doxy, I’d already have told my driver to get the horses trotting. You’re not a doxy though, and I’m not sure you comprehend what you’re requesting.” He scowled, choosing his words more carefully. “I’ll just be very frank. Would we be lovers? By that, I don’t mean we’d

sit by the fire in the evenings and hold hands. Would you join me in my bed? Is that the type of sojourn you're envisioning?"

"We'd see how to proceed once we're there. Maybe it would be too awkward, so we'd just play cards and chat. Maybe we'd agree we don't like each other as much as we thought, and a more complex liaison wouldn't be worth the bother."

"There's no chance of me liking you *less*. I'd likely wind up even more besotted. But you have to recognize—when I run off to the country with a woman—we travel there for salacious purposes."

"How many women have traipsed off with you?" she asked. "I should find out. Have you done it often?"

"I've done it often enough. It's why I'm hesitating. At the moment, you imagine we'd have a romantic idyll in a secret spot, then we'd separate. I'm worried it would be very hard on you afterward."

"Hard . . . how?"

"You're a maiden, and sexual congress involves physical acts that can be very emotional for a female. If you were distressed about your participation, I couldn't help you." He scoffed with what sounded like disgust. "I wouldn't commiserate because I wouldn't be sorry. I don't apply moral tests to my character, so I never suffer moral qualms."

"I wouldn't be sorry either," she said. "I'm the one who suggested this, remember?"

"Have you any idea of how a man and woman carry on when they're alone? Has anyone ever explained it to you?"

"I grew up in Europe, and I spent time in France where the rules are more relaxed. I've received full descriptions of illicit conduct."

"But why ask me? Why now? You're offering me a priceless gift, and I don't deserve it. I'm so afraid, after it was over, I wouldn't behave as you're hoping."

"No matter how our connection resolves, I'd always be glad."

They were silent for an eternity, as he pondered and stewed. Eventually, he blew out a heavy breath. "I just can't."

"All right. I understand."

He smiled, but there wasn't much joy in it. "I feel as if I should apologize for refusing you. I can't believe I'm such a fool."

"No apology is necessary. You were probably correct to save me from myself. I'm lucky you have better sense than me." She slid away from him. "It's late. I should

go.”

“Have I hurt you? Please tell me I haven’t.”

“I’m not hurt; I’m embarrassed. Don’t think badly of me.”

“You haven’t dimmed my esteem. I’m actually impressed that you dared.”

“Fat lot of good it did me, hm?”

She shoved off the blanket covering their laps, and frigid air washed over her. It was like a slap in the face, riveting her with the realization of how reckless she’d been. She leaned over and pushed the door open. An outrider was dawdling there, and he helped her climb out. She thanked him, then, without a goodbye to Warwick, she hurried off.

For some reason, she was on the verge of tears. By his declining her lewd invitation, it seemed as if she’d missed out on something precious. It was stupid to assume so, but she was her father’s daughter, and she always craved more than she’d been given.

Behind her, she heard Warwick climb out too. She should have spun and waved to show him she wasn’t upset. And she wasn’t upset. Not really.

If she had to name her condition, it appeared she was heartbroken, which was silly. He’d denied her the chance to ruin herself. What sane female would lament such an ending?

“Wilhelmina,” he murmured.

She halted and glanced at him.

He was directly under a street lamp, the dim light creating a halo around his golden hair. He’d removed the ribbon that tied it back, so it curled over his shoulders. His cravat was loose, the lace hanging down. He looked marvelously decadent, and when she mooned over him in her bleak, solitary future, she would always recall that exact pose.

“What?” she asked.

“I’ve changed my mind.”

“About what?”

He marched over to her and rested his hands on her waist. He pulled her close and kissed her. It was a dark night, with no people strolling who might see them.

“Let’s sneak away for a few days,” he said. “I would like to whisk you out of London and have my wicked way with you until Wednesday.”

“You’d like to? Seriously?”

“After you walked off, it occurred to me that I have never turned down a

debauched offer. Why should I start with you?"

"Yes, why would you?"

"I'm a cad, and I admit it. You're aware of my worst traits, and you're willing to attempt this anyway. Why shouldn't I oblige you?"

"What brought this on?"

He smirked with amusement. "You seem to be . . . *begging*, and I just love a woman who begs. I always try to supply a lady with precisely what she wants."

"Are you sure? You were afraid *I* hadn't reflected, but you've forced me to worry about your tender male sensibilities."

"My male sensibilities are shouting at me to stop being an idiot."

"You won't feel guilty later on?"

"Are you joking? I'm giddy as a schoolboy on the last day of class."

She spat out a humorless laugh. "Where will we go? When will we go?"

"Tomorrow. How about if you take a cab to my apartment? About noon?"

Now that he was amenable, she was weak in the knees. Would she proceed? She'd led them down this crazed path, so she couldn't be thwarted by a sudden lack of courage.

"Yes, I can be there at noon," she said. "Do you know an appropriate location? It has to be private and secluded."

"Trust me, I know just the spot."

"I'm not surprised."

"I'll see you tomorrow. At noon."

"Don't you dare disappoint me," she said.

"I have disappointed every woman I've ever met, but for *you*, I will come up to snuff."

Their conversation dwindled, and they stared, grinning. A thousand frantic comments swirled on her tongue, but she swallowed them down. If she was disconcerted, it was only to be expected. She shouldn't have proposed the dangerous scheme, but she had, and she would never regret it.

He nodded, urging her down the street. She stepped in and kissed him fiercely, then she drew away and kept on.



WARWICK EXITED HIS CARRIAGE, then, as he reached in and extended a hand to Wilhelmina, he was plagued by the question repeatedly vexing him: *Am I mad to be doing this?*

Well, the answer was obvious. Yes!

He was stark raving mad, but he'd agreed to participate in the risqué adventure, and he wouldn't second-guess.

She was pretty as a picture, her hair pinned up in a haphazard way that was alluring as hell. The autumn afternoon was cool, and they were both chilled to the bone. Her cheeks were rosy, her nose too, and as he gazed at her, his heart flip-flopped with joy. If he didn't watch out, there was no predicting what he might end up giving her.

She had lips that were simply made for kissing, and he couldn't resist. He dipped in and stole a quick one, then he gestured to the cottage.

"What do you think?" he asked.

"It's perfect for the salacious escape I was envisioning. How many times have you traveled here with a young lady?"

"I'm not about to confess the number, and you will not wonder about it."

"Yes, sir."

She delivered a mock salute, as if she were a lowly soldier and he her commanding officer.

"You're not having doubts, are you?" he said.

"Me . . . doubts? I'm so excited I can barely control myself."

"There's a sight I'd like to witness: Wilhelmina Dobbs out of control."

He escorted her to the door, spun the knob, and they went inside.

They were at an isolated house on his father's estate of Stone Manor. With his elevation, Neville had inherited the much grander property of Swindon Hall, but Stone Manor was the place where Warwick and his brothers had been raised. If he had a *home* anywhere in the world, Stone Manor was it.

The cottage had originally been a bailiff's hut from where, over the centuries, guards had searched the woods for poachers. Warwick's grandfather had remodeled it and had put it to a more dissolute use. Because it was so remote, it was the ideal setting for furtive assignations, and since he, his brothers, and his father were libertines, they often reveled in it with trollops who, for whatever reason, couldn't dally in town.

It was small and cozy, just a single floor with a front parlor, dining room,

kitchen, and servant's room at the rear. There were two bedchambers. One was spacious with an ornate, plush bed. The other had more modest furnishings. If Wilhelmina got cold feet—or if *he* did—separate chambers were available.

Neville paid an older couple to serve as caretakers, but also to be maid and butler when necessary. The man had been an actor and his wife an opera dancer. They'd lived scandalous lives in the demimonde, so they understood illicit liaisons and were never shocked by any antic.

He'd sent a footman on a fast horse to notify the pair that he was about to visit and would have a guest. As they entered, the temperature was warm, fires burning in the hearths. Comfortable chairs were positioned by the fire, a table between them. There was wine and cheese on a tray.

His outriders hauled in their luggage and took it to the main bedchamber. They'd transported Warwick on previous trips, so they didn't need instructions as to where they should leave the bags. They hurried out and would stay at the manor, with the servants over the stables.

They'd return early Tuesday, to convey Warwick and Wilhelmina back to London. Her final night would be spent there. He'd slip her into his bachelor apartment or—if they thought better of it—she'd lodge at a coaching inn and depart for Hill Haven on Wednesday morning.

He had four whole days to fill himself with bits and pieces of her, and he intended to tempt her in every way she would ultimately allow. And he was betting she'd *allow* quite a lot.

She studied the surroundings and said, "You must have read my mind. This is exactly what I was anxious to find."

"I figured you'd like it."

"I'm embarrassed to report that I'm incredibly nervous. My pulse is pounding like a drum. It will sound silly, but I'm almost afraid."

He tsked with exasperation. "You'd best not claim you're afraid of *me*."

"I hate not knowing how to act."

"You are supposed to relax and have a lovely sojourn in the country."

"Shall I unpack? Shall I change my clothes? What would you advise?"

"We have a maid and a butler, remember? They'll handle the incidentals. We merely have to enjoy ourselves."

"You're good at this," she said. "You make everything so easy."

"It *is* easy. We were trapped in a carriage for hours. We chatted and told

stories. We'll do the same here."

"That seems pathetically normal."

"If you were presuming I'd jump on you like a ravenous beast, you'll be sorely disappointed."

"I wasn't certain what to expect. I've never run off with a scoundrel before."

He grinned. "I am delighted to be the one to have corrupted you."

"I'm sure you typically can't abide an innocent ninny. What if I bore you to tears?"

"There is absolutely no chance I will be bored in your charming company."

They were awkwardly huddled by the door, and he realized he'd have to smooth over their arrival so she'd stop fretting. He journeyed to the cottage frequently, but he always brought doxies who'd learned the rules of sexual play. He'd never brought a virginal maiden, and suddenly, he was wondering if he was up to the task.

He wanted the experience to be splendid for her, but he was lazy and selfish, and he could be very inconsiderate too. He'd have to work hard to be the man she assumed him to be.

He undid the clasp on her cloak and hung it on a hook by the door. He shed his coat too, then he led her over to the chairs. He sat her down, and he bustled about, throwing a log on the fire, laying a blanket over her lap. Then he sat in the other chair and poured them both a glass of wine.

She clutched at hers like a sailor in an ale house, and she gulped the contents down in a long swallow. Coming up for air, she held out the glass and asked, "May I have another?"

"You may have whatever your little heart desires," he said, dispensing a second helping. "It's my duty to see that your every wish is granted."

"I like the sound of that."

"After we head back to London, you should feel that these were the best four days of your life."

"I've had some great days in my life," she said, "so that's a very high bar for you to climb over."

"I shall take it as a challenge, and I won't fail you."

"Tough talk, Mr. Stone."

"I'm not all *talk*," he said. "As you're about to discover, I am capable of quite a bit of action too."

"I'm thrilled to hear it. I would be irked to imagine I travelled such a distance

for nothing.”

“You, Miss Dobbs, will be the death of me. I’m convinced of it.”

“You can’t lust after me so fiercely that you perish from amour.”

“I shall try to survive your wicked wiles.”

“Do I have wicked wiles? If so, I’ve never noticed them.”

“I will lure them to the fore, so we will have an unobstructed view of your naughtiest impulses.”

“Once they’re in plain sight, I hope you like them.”

“Oh, Wilhelmina, don’t you worry about that. I will like them just fine.”

He reached over, and they clinked their glasses together.

Chapter Seventeen



WILHELMINA SAT AT THE small dining table in what she was calling Warwick's *Cottage of Illicit Passion*. She was leaned forward, her chin on her hand, and studying him.

The candles had burned down to nubs, the evening slowly winding to an end. They'd enjoyed a delicious supper sent over from the manor, and it had been served with several bottles of the best wine from the estate's wine cellar. They were sated and slightly inebriated.

They'd chatted constantly, had told each other about their childhoods, about their fathers and his brothers. She'd laughed until she'd cried, as he'd talked about some of the antics he and his brothers had perpetrated as boys. He'd kept her entertained for hours, so she hadn't had an opportunity to fret over what she'd instigated.

Her nerves hadn't completely disappeared, but he made everything easy, as if she'd repeatedly snuck off to the country with him.

They'd cuddled and cuddled some more. He was such a manly fellow, but so physically affectionate. She was like a colt in a corral, and he was using quiet words and steady deportment to lure her into complacency, so she'd behave as he expected without her even realizing how she'd been coerced.

Their conversation was dwindling, the fires too. It was time to head to bed together. Or not.

She had no idea how to ask him what they should do. She was untethered, as if she was floating down a river. Eventually, she'd reach a destination, without having to worry too much about how she'd arrived.

The food, wine, and good company were making her sleepy. She tried to stifle a yawn, but couldn't manage it.

"I've worn you out," he said, his smile warming her.

"I'm exhausted, but I'm happy."

He stood and extended his hand. "Come. I'll put you to bed."

"Are you joining me there? Is that what we're planning?"

"We'll see what happens."

He always had the perfect answer to calm her fears. He hadn't pushed over a single issue, so she didn't feel as if she had to agree to anything. All the choices were up to her, and she refused to quail with alarm and cry off at the last moment.

He guided her into the larger bedroom, the one with the grand bed and posh furnishings. She didn't protest, her perception of being on the right track growing by the minute. There was destiny in the air, as if she'd been on the correct road, and there had never been a different route she could have selected.

He nestled himself to her back, and he nibbled at her nape, as he plucked the combs from her hair. The blond strands curled down in a silky wave. He cradled her in his arms, running his palms over her shoulders and stomach, each touch like a bolt of lightning that fueled her worst impulses.

She spun to face him, so he could kiss her as she needed to be kissed. He was unbuttoning buttons and untying laces, but he was adept at distracting her so she didn't focus on what was actually occurring.

He sat her on the edge of the mattress and plucked off her shoes. He tossed them away, then brazenly glided his fingers under her skirt to peel off her stockings.

He wrapped her legs around his hips, then eased her onto her back. Her thighs were scandalously widened, their loins pressed tight, so his hard phallus rubbed her private parts, with the fabric of their clothes the sole barrier. He flexed against her, as his lips captured hers in a torrid kiss that went on and on.

The sensation was riveting and too delectable to believe or describe. She couldn't hold him close enough, and she was anxious to be attached in a deeper way, but there was only one means of accomplishing it.

In a fleet move, he lifted her onto the mattress and rolled onto it with her. They landed in a swirl of tangled limbs, with him atop her in the manner she relished. He hadn't stopped kissing her, and the embrace intensified, with both of them recognizing that this was where they'd always been headed. There was no reason to slow down or alter their course.

He was gradually stripping her: gown, corset, chemise. Once he had her down to just her drawers, he nibbled a trail to her breasts and started sucking on her nipples. He played with them, squeezed them, massaged the soft mounds, until she was writhing with desire.

He paused to yank off his shirt, and as he balanced on his knees and jerked it away, she was rewarded with a luscious glimpse of his broad chest. Then he snuggled down, and his bare skin connected with hers for the first time. The shock of it, the heat of it, was so powerful she was surprised they didn't ignite.

He fell to her breasts again, as he slyly tugged her drawers down her legs and past her toes. It was all carelessly handled so that, when she was finally naked, it seemed like the most natural condition in the world.

He raised up slightly so he could peer down her torso.

"Oh, my goodness, Wilhelmina," he murmured. "You're so beautiful."

She blushed with pride. "I'm delighted you think so."

"I'm glad we're here. I'm glad you thought of this."

"I've been having doubts, but you've chased them away."

"It will be fine," he said. "We'll bumble through this with no difficulty."

"That better be true. I have no idea what I'm doing, and you keep bragging that you're a cad. I hope you haven't been lying. I'd like to suppose one of us knows how to proceed."

"I absolutely know how, so just relax and have fun."

"I will try to relax, but if I can't, it's not your fault. I'm totally overwhelmed."

"No, you're not. If I had to explain your current situation, I'd say you've arrived exactly where you belong."

He kissed her yet again, as he toyed with her breasts. He was tantalizing her, arousing her. His naughty fingers roamed down her tummy, across her abdomen, to her womanly hair. When he slid a finger inside her, the feel of it was so remarkable that her hips instinctively flexed into his hand.

He stroked in and out, in and out, as his lips captured her nipples again. Her passion was rising, her body tensing. Although she was a virgin and a spinster, she understood about sexual pleasure. She'd lived in France off and on, and the vixens who'd swarmed around her father had reveled in the chance to instruct her in the amorous arts.

With very little effort, he pushed her into a wild orgasm. She soared to the heavens, reached her peak, then tumbled down. She landed safely in his arms, and he was laughing, preening, proud of himself and the havoc he'd wreaked.

He was whispering endearments, telling her how special she was, that he'd never met a woman quite like her. She was vain enough to assume he was correct: There were very few women like her, but she wouldn't let his flattery go to her head.

She would accept it as raw adulation, uttered in the excitement of the moment.

"You are such a gem," he said.

"I've been called many names, but never a gem. What sort of stone am I?"

"A diamond. Definitely a diamond."

He rolled onto his back and pulled her to him, so she was draped over his chest, her ear directly over his heart where she could hear its steady beating.

They were silent for a bit, and his tormented musings were practically pelting her. He couldn't be having second thoughts! She was naked and half-ruined, and she wouldn't have him suffer an odd burst of conscience. *He* was the great lover and user of women. If one of them was having qualms, it should be her, not him.

"We're not stopping, are we?" she asked, peeking up.

"I need a minute to calm down."

"We're right in the thick of things. Why would you want to calm down?"

"I'm so stimulated that I'm afraid I'll race to the end and scare you."

"I'm fearless and relentless, so you can't scare me."

"Yes, but if I don't control myself, I'll dash to the finish like a green boy. I'll be much too rough."

"You won't be, and even if you are, I'm not a wilting violet. I'll survive some intense desire."

He snorted with amusement. "I'm about to explode, and we've hardly started."

"Well, then, what shall we do about it?"

For once, he looked completely at a loss, so she figured she had to coerce him into moving. She'd never been shy, and nudity was not a scandalous circumstance for her. From when she was a young girl, she'd observed unclad people who'd posed for her father. Human anatomy didn't shock her.

She climbed on top of him, so she had his undivided attention.

"Don't you dare slow down," she said. "I haven't had enough of you, and I refuse to have you panic like a quaking debutante."

The comment was a taunt and a challenge, and it dragged a wicked smile out of him.

"I think you should get exactly what you deserve," he said.

"Promises, promises."

"Trollop."

"Bounder."

He flipped them so she was on the bottom, and she didn't mind. He was a

manly man who liked to be in charge, and she was thrilled to have him lead the way.

They were kissing again, touching and caressing. He was growing more deliberate, more precise. His lust was soaring, and it made her own spiral to new heights.

He was massaging her body, imprinting her shape and size into his hands, and she followed his example. If he stroked a sensitive spot, she stroked one too. If he nibbled and bit, she did too. They wrestled, laughed, and scrapped for purchase, the exhilaration and tenderness increasing by the second.

He took his time, loafing, delaying. It all happened so gradually that none of it seemed rushed or frightening. If anything, she wished he'd hurry up. Apparently, she was a very greedy person, and she couldn't stand much more of his restraint.

Down below, he was fussing with the buttons on his trousers, tugging them down around his flanks. Again, it was happening so gradually that she barely noticed.

Finally—finally!—he reached his limit. He centered his phallus where it was desperate to be, and he began pushing it into her. He kept on and on, the pressure unyielding. He might have been a Viking bent on destruction, a berserker claiming what he viewed as his absolute due. She was simply the innocent maiden who had to furnish what he was demanding.

With a fierce prod of his hips, he burst inside her. She was wet and relaxed from his prior ministrations, and there was only a slight twinge of pain. As he deflowered her, she scarcely felt it.

He froze, his affection so clear that tears flooded her eyes. He brushed his lips to hers and said, "You're not sad, are you? Don't tell me you are. I'll never believe it."

"I'm not sad. I'm happy. I'm relieved that I waited for you. I'm glad you were the one I chose."

"Did I hurt you?"

"No, no. I'm fine."

His torso was trembling, his muscles taut as a bow. He groaned and said, "Can we finish it?"

"You'd better, and would you please cease your delays? I've been wondering about this my entire life."

He couldn't engage in any further conversation. He kissed her, as his hips went to work. He would glide his cock in all the way, then pull out to the tip, then glide it in again. His initial movements were very measured, but they quickly became more raucous, more powerful.

At first, she was confused about how to join in, but she swiftly got the hang of it, and she met him motion for motion. His passion escalated, so he was pounding into her, and it was much too boisterous for her to catalogue any of the details. She hadn't realized it would be so wild, so abandoned and uninhibited. She had to simply hold on and hope she made it through in one piece.

The conclusion arrived rather unexpectedly. He took several deep thrusts, then spilled himself against her womb.

She was aware of how babies were created, that catastrophe could be prevented by the man withdrawing at the last second. Because she was a novice, she hadn't understood that she should have discussed it with him before they'd started in.

Had he ever been taught that trick? He was a skilled lover, so he had to have known about it. Why hadn't he protected her?

She probably should have scolded him, but just that moment, she couldn't force herself to panic over possible consequences. She could only grin over what they'd perpetrated.

His body collapsed, his heavy weight crushing her. He huddled there for a minute or two, then he slid onto his side. She rolled too so they were nose to nose.

"Oh, my lord," he murmured. "I've died and gone to Heaven."

"What a perfectly divine comment."

"You survived?"

"Yes, I survived. How about you? You look a tad overwrought."

"I'm bewildered and completely undone. I admit it. How about you?"

"I'm grand, and would you quit worrying about my delicate condition? I'm many things, but *delicate* isn't one of them."

He sighed with contentment and shifted onto his back, and he draped her over his chest. With their ardor spent, the room was chilly, and he covered them with the blankets to seal them in a cozy cocoon.

They rested there, lost in thought, and she committed as much of it to memory as she could. In the stories she'd heard about carnal amour, no one had ever explained this marvelous period afterward, where it was so quiet, and they were so intimately connected. It was the best part of all.

"Have I mentioned," he said, "that you may be the death of me."

"Yes, I believe you have once or twice."

"I wasn't joking. I've never participated in a coupling like that."

She smirked. "I have no previous experience to guide me, but I will

categorically state that it was spectacular.”

“I didn’t pull out at the end,” he mused, more to himself than to her. “I should have. I’m sorry.”

“Let’s not fret about it now. Let’s just be happy.”

“I am happy,” he said. “In fact, my face is sore from smiling so much.”

They were silent for a while, then she asked, “What do we do next?”

“We snuggle and catch our breath, then—after I stop feeling as if I’ve perished from lust—we’ll try it again.”

“I think, by the time we leave here, you will have turned me into your sexual slave.”

“Aren’t I lucky?”

He dozed off, and she cuddled closer. It kept getting better and better. Before they’d traveled to the country, she’d wondered if the trip would be worth it, if she’d like fornication. There were women who didn’t like it, and fortunately, she wasn’t one of them. It had been tremendous and riveting, and she couldn’t wait until he roused so they could begin again.

She’d finally surrendered her virginity! The act had been just as draining as she’d been told. Exhaustion claimed her, and she slept too.

When she opened her eyes, she endured a frantic moment where she was confused about her location. As recognition settled in, she realized he wasn’t in the bed with her. She peered about and found him over by the window.

He was naked—and not concerned that he was. The moon highlighted his anatomy in silver shades so he could have been a carved marble statue. His back was to her, and she studied his broad shoulders, how they sloped to his waist, how his legs were lean and muscled. She catalogued every feature and, later on, would sketch him in that very pose.

The fire was out, the air icy, and she rose up on an elbow and said, “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.” He didn’t spin around, which was disturbing, but eventually, he glanced over. “Did I wake you?”

“No, but you seem terribly morose, and you must be chilled to the bone. Come to bed.”

She lifted the blankets, anxious to coax him over, but he didn’t budge. He simply stared at her as if he couldn’t figure up how she’d wound up where she was.

“You’re scaring me,” she said. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” It was a lie. He looked dazed and befuddled.

“Well . . . good. I’m delighted to hear it.”

“I proceeded in such a slapdash manner,” he said, “that I barely paused to reflect on whether it was special for you.”

“Is that what’s bothering you? Silly oaf. It was splendid.”

“I was so desperate to have you that I didn’t even take off my boots.”

She chuckled. “You took them off now.”

“Yes, I’m naked as the day I was born. Have I shocked you?”

“I’ve seen male bodies since I was a little girl, so *no*, you haven’t shocked me.”

He frowned. “When have you ever seen a naked man?”

“My father always drew nude models. He let me watch.”

His jaw dropped. “I can’t decide if that’s distressing or bizarre. Don’t ever admit to me how old you were when you first started that.”

“It was about age five, so you have no physical secrets from me.” She patted the mattress, eager to lure him over. “Aren’t you freezing?”

“No, I’m burning up. My mind is racing like mad, and I can’t slow it down.”

“Why is it racing? Please don’t tell me you’re suffering regrets.”

“It’s not regrets precisely. I’m merely trying to deduce our purpose.”

“We’re dallying—for four glorious days.”

“It much more than a simple dalliance.”

As if she were a blushing debutante, anticipation swept through her. Suddenly, she was envisioning a pretty church, wedding bells, and marching down the aisle with him at the altar, but she didn’t have stars in her eyes. She wasn’t Cinderella, and he wasn’t Prince Charming. She wouldn’t dream of what could never be.

He couldn’t and wouldn’t ever shackle himself to her. His father had forbidden it, and Lord Swindon wasn’t the only person in the kingdom with a great deal of pride. She was possessed of an enormous amount of it too, and she would never wedge herself into a family where the patriarch vehemently insisted she didn’t belong in it.

“The sole thing happening here,” she said, “is that the two of us are locked away together. Don’t you dare mope and read more into it than that.”

“I can’t stop pondering what this all means.”

“Yes, you can. Come back to bed! It’s very lonely without you next to me.”

He sauntered over to her, and she was struck by how nonchalant he was about his nude state. It forced her to recall that he was a cad and had most likely removed his clothes for a thousand women.

She would never marry, and she would most particularly never marry a man like him. He was like a magnificent stallion, chasing every mare in the herd. Fidelity would be impossible for him, and she wouldn't have an adulterous rogue in her life.

He seemed to notice how cold it was, and he leapt onto the mattress. She pulled him close, shrieking at the frigid feel of his skin as he snuggled under the covers.

"You rat!" she scolded. "You've turned into an ice sickle."

"I guess I was more uncomfortable than I realized."

"We have to warm you up—and fast."

"Yes, we do. Have you any idea of how we could accomplish it?"

A wicked gleam entered his gaze, one that promised all sorts of decadence. She laughed with joy and said, "I have a fairly good notion of just what you need."

Chapter Eighteen



“DON’T MOVE.”

“My back is cramping.”

“I don’t care. I’m almost finished.”

Warwick stretched his legs, and it garnered him a scolding, but he simply smirked and stretched again. Wilhelmina had him positioned on the bed, and she was sketching him. He probably shouldn’t have allowed it, and who could guess if the drawings might ultimately be viewed by other people, but he was a very vain fellow.

When she’d asked, he’d instantly agreed. He was thoroughly enchanted by her and couldn’t refuse any request she voiced.

He was naked, casually leaned on the pillows. A sheet was draped over his private area, so nothing too shocking was visible. It wasn’t exactly risqué, but then again, it was extremely risqué. He couldn’t remember ever seeing a male nude. Down through the centuries, women had posed for plenty of them, but not men, so it was a disturbing antic.

If anyone ever learned of it, the scandal would be outrageous. She didn’t seem to mind or even recognize the dangers, and he should have pointed them out to her. Yet since meeting her, his common sense had flown out the window.

It was their last day in the country, and the following morning, his outriders would transport them to town. They’d spend the night in London, then she would depart for Hill Haven.

Over the years, he’d snuck off with numerous paramours, and he’d enjoyed every single tryst. But he’d never reveled in one like this. When they’d initially arrived, Wilhelmina had been a maiden and a spinster, with no sexual experience at all, but she’d quickly become adept as a courtesan.

She was comfortable in her body, comfortable with the deeds he’d shown her. She was comfortable with his body too and not the least bit shy or nervous around

him.

She was sitting on a chair, and she worked very fast, having completed several drawings, but she wouldn't let him look at any of them, which was incredibly annoying.

Dressed only in her shift, her hair was pinned up in a messy chignon, her near-nudity driving him wild. He wanted her to climb back into bed, but she was ignoring his sly taunts.

He was studying her as meticulously as she was studying him, committing every feature to memory so he'd never forget. They'd filled every second of their rural sojourn with pleasure: telling stories, sharing histories, fornicating, fornicating some more. They'd barely left the bedchamber, with their two attendants leaving trays of food by the door.

He couldn't figure out how they were supposed to conclude their affair. How could she simply trot to Hill Haven? How was he to resume his decadent bachelor's life?

Then there was the enormous problem that he'd spilled himself inside her womb a few times. For the most part, he'd been cautious, but not with every coupling. Especially not the very first one. He'd lusted after her for so long, and once the dam had burst, he'd proceeded with a reckless abandon.

What if she wound up with child? What then?

He wasn't such a wretch that he'd hand her some money for support, then advise her she had to fend for herself. If she was increasing—maybe with his son!—he was determined to bind himself to her. He'd be a father to the child they'd created.

It was a strange realization. In the past, he'd never wanted to be a father. His own father had been such a dismal failure that Warwick had sworn off the notion, and the fact that he was pondering parenthood was terrifying.

Was he ready to be a father? Was he *eager* to be a father? He'd never carried on so negligently with any female, and it had him questioning his true intentions. Was he deliberately trying to ensnare her? Was that it?

If he'd planted a babe, it would be a way to fetter her so she couldn't escape. He'd be fettered too. It would be a shackle to pressure them into matrimony, but it would mean he'd be disobeying his father. He and Neville didn't have the greatest relationship. Could he upset his father that hideously?

Each facet of the quagmire poked at him like the tip of a sharp knife, and he had no viable answers.

Briefly, he'd raised the subject of a continuing connection, but she'd shot down any discussion. He was beginning to wonder if he shouldn't throw her in his carriage and head north to Gretna Green in Scotland. He couldn't fathom how to live without her, and she was so stubborn. Why not elope? Why give her a choice in the matter?

"When will you be done?" he said.

"Just a minute more."

"It's lonely over here."

"You're so spoiled. Stop whining."

He liked how she sassed him, how she wasn't impressed by him. Her attitude fueled his desire so he wanted her more than ever.

Finally, she tossed down her pencil and tucked the sketches into her bag.

He scowled. "Are you seriously not going to show them to me?"

"I'll take them home and scrutinize them later. If I decide they're any good, I'll turn them into a painting."

"You won't flash my nude self to the entire kingdom, will you? I can't be displayed in London when I'm not wearing any clothes. You're such an impertinent snot, you might enter it in the Royal Exhibition, so the whole city could stare at me when I'm naked."

"I'm a female, so I'm not allowed to participate in the Exhibition. I'm also not allowed to paint nudes. If I ever apply you to canvas, no one will see it but me."

"You better promise."

"I promise, you oaf. Shall we eat? I'm starving."

The change of topic was typical for her. Her brain flitted at a very rapid pace, and he usually couldn't keep up. She had an odd temperament, an artist's sensibilities, and it made her exotic in ways he relished.

All of his adult life, he'd assumed he liked demure, modest women. That's the boring kind of female men were told to cherish, but apparently, he'd been mistaken about his genuine tastes. Obviously, there was a wild aspect to his personality, one that liked fire, spice, and sass much more than normality.

"We'll eat shortly," he said, and he patted the mattress. "Come here."

She smiled a smile as old as Eve's. "Why?"

"I have a surprise for you."

"I bet I know what it is."

"Maybe you do, and maybe you don't, so quit teasing me."

“You’re always so impatient.”

“And you are always so bossy.”

She sashayed over, her hips swaying against her shift. It was a tattered garment, washed too often, so the fabric was very thin. He could observe her most pertinent spots.

He pulled her to him, rolling them so he could pin her down and she couldn’t scoot away. He started out kissing her fiercely, as if he might never have another chance, but it swiftly altered into a sweeter, more tender embrace. He was simply so fond of her, and he could never get enough.

They’d made love earlier, when they’d initially awakened, but he was hard for her again. She had him as aroused as a randy, adolescent boy. As the conclusion of their furtive holiday ticked closer, he felt he needed to add on as many couplings as he could manage, as if the world was about to end and he’d never have an opportunity to fornicate in the future.

Gradually, he removed her shift, so she was naked, and he was quickly inside her. They were never able to slow down and wallow in the journey. They were both so desperately attuned that the sexual act spiraled and completed much before they were ever ready.

This encounter was no different from the rest. Passion escalated, and they soared to the peak together, then drifted down, landing safely in each other’s arms. They were kissing, nibbling, whispering endearments.

Their bodies separated, and he flopped onto his back and stared at the ceiling. He was bewildered over his path, his choices. He’d prevented himself from negligently spilling his seed again, but it had been a near thing. He was so obsessed with her, and he had no ability to control himself.

If he intended to listen to his father, he had to begin his marital search in earnest. If that was his plan, why was he irresponsibly copulating with Wilhelmina?

Would he impregnate her, then traipse off and marry a debutante? Would the first gossip his young bride heard about him be that he’d sired a bastard right before their wedding? He was a cad, but he liked to think he wouldn’t behave like that.

So what was he doing?

He couldn’t restrain himself around her. With their being locked away, it seemed as if they were trapped in a bubble, that the outside world didn’t exist and societal rules didn’t apply. He felt as if he could commit any sin with her and there would be no penalty.

"You're frowning," she said, "so you're pondering issues that will exhaust me."

"I'm not frowning. I'm contemplating."

"No, you're frowning. What's wrong?"

"Will you be my mistress?"

He blurted out the query, and her reply was totally expected.

"No."

"Don't automatically refuse. When I asked you at Hill Haven, we were barely acquainted." He ran a hand over her belly, over her beautiful breasts. "You can't be eager to part on Wednesday."

She sighed with irritation. "Could we not debate this again?"

"We have to. I can't describe your feelings toward me because I can never deduce what sorts of thoughts are rattling through that insane mind of yours, but I know what *I* want: I want you to stay with me. You belong by my side."

"As your mistress . . ."

"Yes." He gestured around the room, indicating the cottage and the decadency it represented. "We could be together like this constantly."

"Oh, Warwick," she murmured, and she clucked her tongue as if he were a thick-headed dunce. "This isn't real life. This is a fantasy. This is a dream we snatched for ourselves, but it was never meant to be forever. Please don't be a pest about it."

"Can you return to Hill Haven and never see me again? Tell me the truth and don't lie."

"Of course I can return to Hill Haven. I live there. It's my home. What would I have if I remained in town with you?"

"Well, for starters, you'd have *me*."

"I realize you view yourself as a precious prize, but in my book, you're not much of a catch."

Ever since they'd met, they'd been having versions of this conversation, and it was hilarious that *he* was the one begging for a continuing connection. He supposed it was a divine retribution that he—the great lover and user of women—was being spurned.

He'd finally found a female worth having, worth keeping, and she wasn't interested.

"I am not a prize?" He huffed with feigned offense. "I am descended from a family of famous men, many of whom have ruled in England for generations. My father is an earl—in case you've forgotten."

“You poor baby. Why must I always stroke your ego?”

“I’m a man, so it’s your job to stroke it.”

She smirked. “What if I came to London? Paint a picture for me of what you envision. Would you rent me a house? Would you hire servants and furnish me with a carriage? Would you provide an allowance, so I could buy fashionable clothes and attire myself in grand style when I was prancing about on your arm?”

“I would do all of that for you—and much more besides.”

“For how long would you do it? Six months? A year? Two years?”

He hated it when she tried to pin him down. He hadn’t reflected on the details. “We’re so compatible. I’m guessing it would be a lengthy affair.”

“What about after you were married? Would we keep on then? Would you disgrace yourself and betray your wife?”

These were the questions that vexed him because men of his station always cheated and betrayed. “Yes, we’d keep on.”

“There’s the problem for you. I won’t be the *other* woman in any relationship.”

“It wouldn’t be like that,” he said, even though it absolutely would be.

“I’m certain this will surprise you, but my ego is much bigger than yours. I would never sit in a little apartment, waiting for you to arrive, but aware that it could only happen after you snuck away from your bride. I won’t carry on like that, and you don’t really want to either. You’re not thinking clearly.”

“We’d be very discreet. No one would ever know.”

“Everyone would know. It would be an open secret. And *I* am a tad notorious. If my name was ever linked to yours, the news would spread like wildfire. People would run to your wife in order to apprise her.”

“You might be correct,” he grumbled.

“I also won’t proceed when your father is so vehemently opposed to our being cordial. I won’t permit him to insult me ever again. The evening he chastised me on his verandah, I bit my tongue and let him be an ass, but if he ever dared in the future, I wouldn’t be so polite.”

“It would be amusing to have you level your fury at him.”

“It wouldn’t be amusing. It would be sad and awful.”

“My father would probably deserve it.”

“Maybe, but we’re not finding out.”

“I could talk to him. I could explain how fond I am. He truly doesn’t concern himself over the amours I pursue, and I have no idea why he complained about this

one.”

“It’s because of *my* father. I’m more disreputable than other doxies with whom you’ve dallied.”

“You’re not a doxy, and I won’t listen to you claiming you are.”

She waved a hand down her naked torso. “I’ve lost the right to insist I’m a virtuous maiden. That horse left the barn when you deflowered me.”

A muscle ticked in his cheek. He was irked by her obstinacy. He was suffering, too, from the worst perception that—if he let her go—he’d regret it forever. The notion of riding off to Scotland with her was sounding better by the minute.

“I’m glad I ruined you,” he said, grinning. “It was worth it.”

“I heartily concur, but we travelled to the country to have a brief fling. There were to be no strings attached.”

Had they agreed it would be brief? That there would be no strings? He couldn’t recall. In his memory, it seemed to have occurred quickly, with scant discussion of the particulars.

She was the female in their paltry duo. She was supposed to be begging him to continue on with her, yet she couldn’t care less. What was wrong with her? Why was she so strange?

“I want to attach some strings,” he said. “I don’t recollect stating that there wouldn’t be any, and I’d like to add some.”

“Too late,” she retorted, and she laughed. “You’re laboring under a peculiar delusion where you assume we could be happy, but I’m not a single person. Edna and Charlie live with me, and I support them. Even if I broke down and allowed you to coerce me into a more permanent liaison, I would have an older woman and a young boy residing with me. They’d be watching my every move, so you couldn’t pop in and drag me up to my bedchamber for a tryst.”

“I always conveniently forget about them, don’t I?”

“While I recognize that you consider my work to be a hobby—”

“I don’t view it that way! Don’t accuse me of being a pompous prig.”

“I won’t, but it’s a drive that’s in my blood. I don’t have lazy afternoons where I can loaf and play with you. You’re rich and indolent, so you believe everyone else is rich and indolent too. But I’m not a wealthy lady of leisure. I have a life that’s busy and fulfilling. If I refused to humor you by loafing and playing too, you’d start to nag and pout. We’d fight, and I don’t intend to ever quarrel with you.”

“We could devise a suitable arrangement.”

She rolled her eyes. "You simply *think* we could devise it, but that's because you're so spoiled. I keep rejecting your schemes, so you're determined to change my mind. If you actually won me, you'd wish very fast that you hadn't. Then where would I be?"

"If you won't be my mistress, then how about this? Marry me."

"Marry . . . you?" She sputtered with hilarity.

"Yes. Let's not return to London. Let's head to Scotland instead. We'll elope."

"What would your father's opinion be of that?"

"It doesn't matter what it would be. He wouldn't be the one marrying you."

"What about your friends, like that toplofty Lord Drake and that snooty Mrs. Smithwaite? What would they say when they were forced to socialize with your odd artist-wife who had no pedigree to recommend her?"

"It especially doesn't matter what *they* would say. I'd be ecstatic."

"You're growing more and more absurd, and the sorrow of our parting will be quick and fleeting. You'll be over me before you can blink. And *I* will be over you."

She dipped in and kissed him, then she slid off the bed. She scrounged around on the floor, located her shift, and pulled it on. She tugged on her robe too, then she went to the door and yanked it open. She paused to glance back at him.

"I'm ordering breakfast and a bath," she said. "I'll wash, then bring you some food. Don't go anywhere."

"I wasn't planning on it."

"It's our last day. We should spend it in bed."

She vanished, and he lounged on the pillow, feeling lonelier than he'd ever been.

It had been deranged to leap into an affair with her. She had a half-brother and an aunt to support, and she would never jeopardize their security. She was very loyal and would stay at Hill Haven even though she was miserable there. She would stay for Edna and Charlie. She would give up Warwick for them.

He'd like to be angry about it, but how could he fault her for being loyal?

She didn't believe they could be happy, so why press? She could never satisfy his father, yet when Neville had constantly dallied with the *wrong* sort of girl, it was galling to have him complain about her. Why listen to him?

Normally, Warwick would have ignored him, but a parent picked his child's bride. A parent stood outside a relationship and was able to assess it more rationally. Warwick hated to bicker with Neville, but he wanted Wilhelmina more than he'd ever

wanted anything. So how could he and Neville ever come to terms?

As she'd pointed out, she was very unusual. Was that why his fascination burned so hotly? Was it because she was so different? If she'd been more ordinary, would he have bothered with her?

He had no idea. They had one more day together and that was it. They were about to return to the real world. How could she blithely resume her dull, tedious life? How could she expect him to do the same?

The woman was mad as a hatter, but hadn't he always understood that about her?

Chapter Nineteen



“IT’S NICE TO SEE you again.”

“It’s nice to see you too.”

Wilhelmina smiled at Holden Drake, pretending to be affable and serene when she wasn’t.

She was standing in a packed theater lobby, drinking warm champagne and milling in the crowd. She’d gotten separated from Warwick, and when she’d turned around, she’d bumped into Lord Drake. He appeared delighted to have encountered her, but she couldn’t bear to talk to him. Her mood was so low that she wanted to slink to a quiet corner and compose herself before she headed up to their box.

She was back in London, and it was her last night with Warwick. His plan had been to smuggle her into his bachelor apartment and pass their final minutes in his bed. She’d been tempted, but had mustered the fortitude to refuse. She wasn’t about to have his servants stumble on her in the exact spot where she should never be, so she’d booked a room at a coaching inn instead.

She couldn’t imagine when she’d travel to town again. It would definitely be far in the future, after her fondness had completely vanished. Her most recent trip, where she’d run into him the very first day, had burgeoned into a delicious disaster, and she wouldn’t repeat her folly.

The notion of spending the evening apart had been too distressing, so they’d decided to attend the theater. He’d been invited to a private party afterward, and they would attend that too, then he’d deliver her to the coaching inn at dawn.

He’d asked to tarry and see her off, but she’d told him he couldn’t. She simply couldn’t fathom how they could say goodbye in such a public place.

She’d always heard that a female couldn’t engage in sexual conduct in a casual way, but she hadn’t believed it was true. She was Jefferson Dobbs’ daughter, so she could be very cold-blooded when callousness was required. She’d assumed she could

trifle and play—as a man would—then walk away unscathed, but she'd been wrong.

She was desperately in love with him and regretting all her choices. He'd tendered another indecent proposal, and she'd declined it. Then he'd tendered a *decent* proposal, that being marriage, and she'd declined that too.

Why had she?

She'd claimed she wouldn't like to upset his father, but she didn't care about Neville Stone. Why let him interfere?

Well, the answer to that question was obvious: *She* might have been willing to wed Warwick against his father's wishes, but Warwick would have been sorry forever. At the moment, he thought he could brazen it out, but reality would have slapped him in the face pretty fast. She wouldn't create a rift between him and his father.

She wouldn't ever deliberately dim his esteem. For the next few hours, when he looked at her, she would be showered with his fabulous affection, and after her coach pulled away, he would think they could have had a happy ending.

She was saving him from himself, saving his relationship with his father, and she would constantly remind herself it had been her only option. She would keep him from ruining his life, and she would go home and resume her tedious existence. It would take her an enormous amount of time and effort to calm down, but she would calm down. She would survive.

"What brings you to town?" Lord Drake asked.

"I came for the Royal Exhibition."

He tsked. "I just realized I owe you an apology. I had promised to inquire as to whether you could enter, and I never did."

She hadn't expected him to check for her, and it was entirely typical that he would have forgotten the minute he'd departed Hill Haven.

"No apology is necessary," she said. "Even if I could have entered, I didn't have any pieces that would have been suitable."

"You're being too modest. I went to the showing, and you're more talented than nearly every artist who was included."

"You're very kind."

"When I was in the country, my friend, Rowena, rudely asked if you would give her a painting, and you refused, but *I* will ask more courteously if you'd give one to me. Or I'd be glad to pay for it."

She tried to picture giving him a painting. It was the sort of chance for which artists had yearned throughout history. Perhaps he would become her patron! Why not

oblige him?

She almost agreed, but managed to bite her tongue. She was in a surly mood and didn't have it in her to be gracious.

"I don't usually give them away," she said, "so let me think about it. I avoid the bigger life I enjoyed with my father, and I don't distribute my work."

"I understand."

It was an easy lie to tell. Once she strolled off, he'd never ponder her again.

"Who are you with tonight?" he asked. "I didn't notice you sitting in any of the boxes or I would have come over to say hello."

"I'm with Warwick Stone," she inappropriately mentioned.

"Warwick is here? I didn't notice him either."

She felt compelled to add an explanation. "I haven't been to the theater in ages, and when I complained that I hadn't, he offered to escort me."

"Are you two still friendly?"

It was a bland comment, but underneath it, she sensed him seeking information. "We haven't been in contact. I bumped into him at the Exhibition—by accident."

"Really?"

He smirked with amusement. Clearly, he hadn't been swayed by her paltry attempt at fabrication, and her cheeks heated.

"I stopped by Warwick's apartment," he said, "and a footman told me he was away for a few days."

"I have no idea where he's been. I'm not in a position to have been apprised about his schedule."

"I bribed the fellow, and he confided that Warwick had taken a young lady with him—to a cottage on his father's property. I know about that cottage. In fact, I've used it myself for salacious purposes."

"Oh, my, but that sounds incredibly scandalous. I'm shocked that you would discuss such a sordid topic in my presence."

She was a good liar, but he wasn't fooled. His gaze grew concerned. "I've been acquainted with Warwick since we were boys."

"Lucky you. He seems very nice."

"Watch yourself with him. Don't dig yourself into a hole that's too deep to escape."

"We're socially cordial," she claimed. "That's all."

"If you were my sister, we'd have a chat about choices and consequences."

"I can't imagine why you'd suppose we should do that."

"Can't you?"

He raised a brow, and his look was so piercing that she felt as if he could peer down to the bottom of her heart where her petty vanities resided. Suddenly, she was on the verge of throwing herself at his feet, begging him to advise her how to maneuver through the approaching months without expiring from grief.

The worst part of what she'd done, the most difficult part, was that she could never confess to anyone what had happened with Warwick. Lord Drake was a notorious scoundrel, and she suspected he would commiserate and maybe even share some vital suggestions.

For some ridiculous reason, she was about to burst into tears, so she shifted away from him and said, "Would you excuse me? I should get another glass of champagne before I head to my seat. I should find Mr. Stone too. We were separated, and I'm sure he's searching for me."

"Tell him I'll call on him tomorrow. I haven't seen him in weeks. I'd like to hear what he's been up to recently."

"I will tell him."

"And be careful. Please?"

"I'm always careful." She stepped into the crowd and was swallowed up.

She was anxious to return to their box, but she couldn't figure out which hall would lead to the correct stairs. She started down one, but halted when she noted a couple snuggled in a dark corner. She didn't have to focus very hard to recognize Warwick and Rowena Smithwaite.

Their bodies were pressed together, her skirt tangled around his legs, and he had a hand on her waist. He murmured a remark that had her chuckling in a manner that oozed carnal promise. Were they lovers? Had he been with Mrs. Smithwaite after he'd left Hill Haven?

Wilhelmina had once questioned him about the rich, gorgeous widow, and he'd denied any relationship, but they were so comfortable with each other. Obviously, an affair must have blossomed.

He smiled at the obnoxious vixen, and Wilhelmina was riveted by it. He smiled at *her* exactly the same way. She'd basked in it and had begun to presume she couldn't live without it, but apparently, he displayed it for every female he encountered. She was such a naïve ninny that she hadn't realized it.

After she was home and feeling as if she might die from a broken heart, she had to remember that smile, how casually he'd directed it at another woman. Maybe, just maybe, it would be a balm to remind her that *his* view of their amour was very different from hers.

He'd asked her to marry him, and she'd refused, and it was clear she'd made the right decision. With regard to him, she couldn't ever forget that fact.



“WILL YOU HAVE SOME wine?”

“That would be wonderful. I’ve been traveling all day, and I’m a bit flustered.”

Neville gestured to a sofa, glaring at Blanche Milton as she settled herself on it.

He couldn't hide his aggravation over her unexpected arrival. He was headed to his gambling club of *Ralston's*. On Tuesday evenings, Sybil Jones, the club's owner, served a private supper for him and his friends, and it was a highlight for him.

He and Blanche were in his front parlor, at his town house. He seated himself on a chair across from her, then waited as the butler served them. Then Neville waved him out. He could have let the man dawdle to be of further assistance, but he wasn't about to drink more than a single glass with her.

He never liked to be rude, but he was in a hurry, and she appeared extremely rattled, as if she was experiencing some difficulties. It meant she intended a lengthy conversation. She would likely seek his advice and perhaps even his intervention in some issue or other, but he hated to bestir himself and could rarely be bothered.

“What brings you by so late?” he asked her.

“It is late, isn't it? I figured you'd be out socializing already.”

“I'm about to walk out the door. I have an appointment—shortly—at my club.” He stared implacably, imparting the distinct message that he couldn't tarry.

She took the hint and jumped in quickly. “I'll begin by apologizing for my visiting you without warning. You must think I'm mad.”

“No, but I will admit to being curious. How are things at Hill Haven?”

“Everything there is perfect.” She laughed, and it was definitely forced.

“Then what's wrong? What could have happened that this discussion couldn't have been held in the morning? Have you even stopped by your town house yet?”

“No. My journey was impulsive, so I didn’t depart at a sensible hour. As the miles sped by, I was pondering you so avidly that I simply had to speak with you immediately.”

She flashed a coquettish look that was a tad startling. They’d been lovers on a few occasions, back when her husband, Harold, had been alive. She’d been an unhappy wife who’d once slyly mused that she ought to leave Harold, so Neville had abruptly severed their pathetic dalliance.

He wasn’t the most ethical fellow, but he would never have ruined her marriage, so after that, he hadn’t philandered with her again.

Was she hoping he’d drag her up to his bedchamber? Was she hoping they’d have a roll on the mattress for old time’s sake? The prospect was disturbing. She was still attractive, but these days, when he chose trollops to entertain him, they were quite a bit younger and quite a bit prettier.

“What is it you need, Blanche? As I mentioned, I was just walking out the door. Should we put this off until tomorrow? If a disaster has occurred, there’s no reason we must deal with it tonight. Should we reconvene in the morning? Wouldn’t that be better?”

She seemed bewildered, as if she couldn’t deduce how she’d staggered into his parlor. “Yes, I guess we could chat tomorrow, but could I state the dilemma now? If you have a period to reflect, you might be able to devise a solution.”

“Certainly. What has vexed you?”

“I . . . ah . . . was very disappointed when Warwick passed on his chance to wed Cassandra.”

“Oh.” Neville’s expression was blank, his tone noncommittal.

“They were a marvelous couple. Did he confide in you as to why he didn’t like her?”

“It wasn’t that he didn’t *like* her,” Neville lied. “He’s simply very sophisticated. He traveled the world in the army, and it left him too different from her. He is too stuffy and jaded for a girl so energetic and spirited.”

“A man should have a youthful bride. Everyone knows that.”

“It’s not his view. He’d like a candidate who’ll match him in temperament and maturity.”

“Cassandra is very mature! I can’t believe he didn’t realize it.”

Neville shrugged. “Our children don’t always behave as we predict they will.”

“Could you talk to him for me? Could you persuade him to change his mind?”

Your boys worship you, so I'm sure you'd have a positive effect."

"You're slathering a fine sheen on it. My boys tolerate me. We're not that close, and they don't deem me to be a role model."

"But still, you're his father. If you insisted, he'd listen to you."

"I doubt that very much."

"What if you demanded he propose? A father picks his son's wife. Why shouldn't you pick Cassandra for him?"

"Warwick considered her, then declined to bind himself. In my book, that's the end of it. We have to move on."

"They'd be so good together!"

She practically wailed the comment, and he scowled. "What is this really about? You're so frantic that you're scaring me."

She hemmed and hawed, then finally admitted, "There are rumors circulating about Cassandra."

Neville sighed. "Warwick claimed there was a situation with her, and evidently, it's too hideous to describe."

"They are just rumors! They're not true, but they're spreading, and you're aware of how vicious people can be. They're hurting my family."

"I'm sorry to hear it."

A cunning gleam entered her gaze. "I thought, if we announced an engagement between Cassandra and Warwick, the problem might vanish."

"It wouldn't. In my experience, if a story is particularly titillating, it swirls forever."

"We're friends, Neville. Aren't we friends?"

"Yes, Blanche, we're friends."

"Won't you help me? We can't allow my daughter to be treated like this."

"What is the rumor, Blanche? Can you tell me?"

Her cheeks grew so red he was surprised she didn't ignite. "No, I can't tell you. It's too ugly to repeat."

Her refusal to divulge the details had him supposing the gossip was accurate, which was too bad.

London was a malicious place. His peers were lazy and spiteful. They relished a salacious incident, and the higher the person involved, the more eagerly they chattered. They didn't care who was destroyed.

"I can't pressure Warwick for you," he said. "Even if I commanded him, he

would never heed me, so it would cause me to quarrel with him.”

“You’re his father though.” She mentioned it as if he kept forgetting. “You could make him proceed.”

“The fact that you imagine I have that much power over my sons is amusing to me.” He downed his wine and stood, signaling the meeting was over. “Now then, I hate to be rude, but I really am in a hurry.”

She stared up at him, appearing woeful and miserable. Clearly, she was struggling to devise a better argument, one that would sway him, but he’d been brutally honest when he’d said Warwick wouldn’t buckle to paternal pressure. And with Warwick attaching himself to gorgeous, exotic, Wilhelmina Dobbs, he especially wouldn’t buckle.

Warwick was busy sowing some oats, and until they were sowed, he would never shackle himself to a tedious, ordinary girl. Besides, with a scandal brewing, Warwick should be a thousand miles away from Cassandra Milton.

His glower was firm and stern, and ultimately, she set her undrunk wine on a nearby table. She pushed herself to her feet, and she seemed much older than she’d been when she’d arrived.

“May I stop by tomorrow,” she asked, “so we could discuss this further?”

“It would be futile. I could never convince Warwick to wed her.”

“You could—if you wanted to.”

“Then I guess I’ll admit I don’t want to. I won’t fight with him over your daughter.”

She was about to launch into a diatribe, so he whipped away and marched to the door. He yanked it open and would have called for the butler to escort her out, but the man was hovering, apparently having figured she wouldn’t be staying long.

“Mrs. Milton is just leaving,” Neville said. “Would you show her out?”

“I will, my lord.” The man gestured to Blanche. “If you’ll come with me, Mrs. Milton?”

Blanche dawdled and fumed, but she’d been dismissed, and she was a female who had no idea how to stand up to a man like Neville. Wilhelmina Dobbs knew how, but not Blanche Milton. The realization startled him, but he tossed it away and stepped back so he wasn’t blocking her way.

“Thank you for seeing me,” she said.

“I’m always glad to be of service,” he replied, not meaning it.

She swept out, and she probably assumed she looked grand and offended, but

in reality, she simply looked beaten down and exhausted.

He shut the door behind her, then poured himself another glass of wine. He sipped it and pondered the calamity. What had Cassandra done? If it was terrible enough to have her mother flying to town, in a failed attempt to tamp down the quagmire, it must have been horrific.

“Warwick dodged a bullet,” he muttered to the empty room, and he eased down onto the sofa to enjoy his beverage in the peace and quiet.



BLANCHE SAT IN HER carriage, but it wasn't moving. It was a pleasant autumn night, with no rain for once, so the streets were crammed with vehicles. Traffic had slowed to a crawl.

She was anxious to get to her house and climb into her bed so she could calm down.

She shouldn't have visited Neville so late in the evening. He'd been too distracted to talk seriously. She should have waited until morning, should have politely requested an appointment—like a sane person. It was just that she was so enraged about Cassandra she wasn't thinking straight.

Blanche had presumed, if they slithered to the country, the rumors would evaporate, but they hadn't. She'd had three parties scheduled for other bachelors who'd been interested in pursuing a match with Cassandra. When the first letter had arrived, where the young man's mother had cancelled due to a family emergency, she hadn't been concerned. But when the second one had arrived, then the third, the catastrophe had become obvious.

The tale had spread far and wide, so that vixen, Rowena Smithwaite, had destroyed Cassandra. Blanche had never pictured herself as being particularly violent, but she now understood how a mother could be driven to homicide. It would not be beyond her to buy a pistol and shoot Mrs. Smithwaite right in the middle of her cold, black heart.

Suddenly, the carriage lurched forward. Blanche was thrown about on the seat, and as she grabbed for purchase, she happened to glance out the window at the crowd strolling by. The sight that confronted her was so astounding that she could have fainted from shock.

Wilhelmina was prancing by with Warwick Stone. She was snuggled to his side, the dastardly pair laughing and so cordial they might have been friends for a thousand years. Blanche couldn't believe her eyes!

Wilhelmina had written to apprise Blanche and Edna that she would travel home on Wednesday. It was Tuesday night and would be Wednesday very soon. What had she actually been doing in London? Had she even attended the Exhibition? Had her entire trip been a ruse so she could misbehave with Warwick Stone?

Blanche was so angry that little red dots had formed on the edge of her vision. Why could nothing ever go as she planned? Why had she been plagued with so many problems?

She was a lonely widow, with no man to guide her. After Cassandra had ruined herself with Jefferson, Blanche had done the best she could by her daughter. And although Wilhelmina never thought so, she'd done her best by her too—even though she'd never been grateful.

The obligation imposed on Wilhelmina had been small. She'd only had to shoulder a tiny burden. In exchange, she'd been given free room and board forever. She'd been given an artist's studio and the supplies she required to carry on her father's work. To receive those boons, she merely had to keep her mouth shut about Cassandra.

There was no question now. Blanche had been wondering how Mrs. Smithwaite had learned of Cassandra's disgrace. She'd blamed it on a servant, but clearly, Wilhelmina had told Warwick Stone, and he had told Mrs. Smithwaite.

Her carriage rattled to a stop, and she peeked out, seeing that she was at her door. She'd sent a note, so she was expected, and a footman rushed out to assist her. As she trudged inside, the butler welcomed her with an obsequious smile that was annoying. Blanche didn't bother with a courteous response. She had other issues to address.

"What time will Wilhelmina return?" she asked him.

The man scowled. "You must be confused, Mrs. Milton. Miss Dobbs went home to Hill Haven on Friday. Early."

Blanche's jaw dropped. "She left on Friday?"

"Ah . . . yes? I assume she's there . . . ?"

Wilhelmina had lied about everything! How involved was she with Warwick Stone? Were they lovers? Was that it?

Probably. She was Jefferson's child after all. Did the silly girl think Mr. Stone

was infatuated? Did she suppose the cad would marry her because she'd furnished what he craved?

In many ways, Wilhelmina was very smart, but she could be very stupid too. Warwick Stone would never wed her. His father wouldn't let him. If she'd succumbed to passion, and if she landed herself in a jam, how would she get herself out of it?

She must have convinced herself that Warwick Stone would save her, but she wasn't aware of how callous the men of the Stone family could be.

It didn't matter anyway. None of it mattered. Wilhelmina had betrayed Blanche, had blabbed Blanche's secret to the world. Blanche's valiant efforts to protect Cassandra had been wrecked. Wilhelmina had accomplished it while she was lifting her skirt for Warwick Stone.

A price would have to be paid for that duplicity. A very high price, and Wilhelmina wouldn't like to discover just how expensive her affair would be.

Chapter Twenty



"ARE YOU SURE YOU won't stay?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

Warwick smiled at Wilhelmina and shrugged. "It was worth asking. What if I'd finally changed your mind?"

"You couldn't have changed it."

"Will you write to me?"

"No."

He blew out a heavy breath. "You are so stubborn."

"Why would we correspond? It would only prolong the sorrow of our parting."

"At least you're willing to admit it will be sorrowful. From how blithely you've viewed our pending separation, I accuse you of having a heart of stone."

They were in his carriage, snuggled on the seat, and parked in the yard of the coaching inn. Her bags were loaded in the public coach. The other passengers were milling, goodbyes being spoken.

His minutes with her had ticked to an end. He'd like to climb out with her, to wave as she rolled away, but she'd refused to let him. They'd courted sufficient danger by attending the theater the prior evening, and she wouldn't exacerbate the chance of bumping into any acquaintances.

They'd been up all night, but he wasn't tired. After they'd left the theater, they'd gone to a gambling party, the kind where women were permitted to join in and no one noticed who a man brought as his companion. It had allowed them to be close every moment, and they'd definitely squeezed in all the joy they could manage.

"I should be exhausted," she said, "but I'm not."

"I'm not either. You've infused my veins with an immortal elixir, and I may be awake forever."

She rested a palm on his cheek. "I'm glad we met."

"This doesn't have to be over. You can come to town whenever you like. I'll always welcome you."

"I won't be able to get away."

"You're not a prisoner at Hill Haven. You could come if you wanted to."

She sighed, but didn't reply with the truth, which was that she *didn't* want to.

"Take care of yourself," she said. "Be safe. Be happy."

"I shall say the same."

An ostler called to the passengers, bellowing that the coach was ready. For quite a while there, it had seemed as if they'd entered a magical period where they might continue on into infinity, but that had been a fool's dream.

He pulled her to him and kissed her fiercely.

"If you ever need anything," he said, "contact me immediately."

"My life is so boring. What could possibly happen where I would need you?"

"You can't predict how the future might unfold."

"Yes, I can. My days are exactly the same, but yours aren't. Try to stay out of trouble."

"Don't you dare fall in love with some dashing fellow. I'd be so jealous."

"I will never fall in love. I promise."

"Think of me sometimes, would you?" He sounded as if he was begging.

"I will think of you until I draw my last breath."

The ostler called again, so they couldn't keep delaying.

"I'll miss you every second," she said, and she pushed the door open.

He suffered a surge of anxiety that was so powerful—if he'd been standing—it would have knocked him over. Could she really leave? Could he really let her go? But what could he do?

He had no hold over her. He had no authority. The sole method to control her was to marry her. He'd proposed, but she'd declined.

He clasped her hand, and the words burst out of him. "I love you, Wilhelmina Dobbs."

She frowned, as if she pitied him, and instead of answering with a fond declaration of her own, she said, "Don't tell me things like that. It simply makes this so much harder."

She yanked away and climbed out. An outrider shut the door and hooked the latch. Warwick peeked out the curtain, watching as she boarded, as her driver cracked

the whip and the vehicle lumbered away.

Her departure had been approaching all week, rushing toward him like a bad accident. Now it had arrived, and he felt frozen on the inside. He was a manly man who hadn't believed *love* was an actual sentiment, but apparently, it was, and he'd been struck in the worst way. Where was he to put all his swirling emotion? How was he to ignore what had transpired?

He was heartbroken and bereft, and the depth of his affection was just settling in. In all his philandering, he hadn't understood how special a paramour could grow to be.

He couldn't guess how long he tarried in the coaching inn's yard. His servants must have been worried because, eventually, an outrider poked his nose in and asked, "Are you all right, sir? May I assist you?"

"I'm fine," he lied. "Let's get out of here. Take me home."



"HOW SHALL WE PROCEED?"

"I have no idea."

Cassandra gaped at her mother and said, "Why wouldn't Lord Swindon help you? I thought you were friends."

"Evidently, we weren't as close as I imagined."

Her mother had been back for days, and she wouldn't discuss her experience in London. She'd been locked in her room, silently fuming, and it was disconcerting for her to be so subdued. Why would she let Lord Swindon crush her spirit? Warwick Stone wasn't that grand, so why fret over him?

Blanche had been sure she could persuade Lord Swindon to change Warwick's mind, but Cassandra wasn't that keen to have it changed. She simply wanted to be a bride so she could escape Hill Haven. She didn't much care who her husband was so long as he provided the future she was determined to have.

With rumors spreading about her prior *situation*, she expected her mother to quell the catastrophe. If Lord Swindon wouldn't aid them, there had to be other options. Her mother was rich and important, and she had to fix what was occurring.

"I'm tired of your moping," Cassandra said. "You can't repair the mess when you're so miserable. You're too distracted."

“Cassandra, please! My head is pounding. Can’t you give it a rest?”

“No. I’m being destroyed. What if you . . . you . . . sued Mrs. Smithwaite for slander? What about that?”

Blanche scoffed with disgust. “You can’t sue someone for telling the truth.”

“Why can’t you? She’s harming me, and it oughtn’t to be allowed.”

“And if we sued her, it would draw attention to the story. I hate to alarm you, but the gossip has circulated far and wide. Even Lord Swindon had heard there was a problem. We’d wind up having to litigate with the whole kingdom.”

“Well, why don’t you then? You can’t permit such despicable people to drag us down.”

Cassandra’s tone was very snotty, but honestly! Blanche was acting as if *she* was the one whose life had imploded. She was so focused on her own gloom that she couldn’t see the bigger picture.

They were in Blanche’s bedchamber, in the sitting room. Her mother was seated at a table by the window, while Cassandra paced and chastised her. Blanche was staring across the garden toward Wilhelmina’s cottage, as if she was searching for something she couldn’t find.

“I can’t listen to your whining,” Blanche said. “Maybe tomorrow we can confer about our next step, although I can’t fathom what it will be. You’d best prepare yourself.”

“For what?”

“For the possibility that you won’t ever marry.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Of course I’ll marry. This is merely a bump in the road.”

Blanche shook her head to disagree. “We could send you to live in Boston or perhaps Cairo and hope the news doesn’t precede you.” She mentioned the foreign cities in a vague way, as if they were on the moon and Cassandra could travel there.

“I’m not moving to Boston or Cairo. You’re being absurd, and you’re correct that we shouldn’t discuss this now. Your wits have completely vanished.”

Cassandra started for the door, but before she reached it, her mother softly muttered, “I saw Wilhelmina.”

“You saw her where?”

“In town. She claimed she was there for the Royal Exhibition, but she’s been having an affair with Warwick Stone.”

Cassandra scowled. “What are you talking about?”

“They’re . . . involved. From what I witnessed, I’m betting she’s ruined.”

Cassandra's jaw dropped. "I don't believe it. Wilhelmina has always been so smug about my own fall from grace. She would never lower herself to walk the same path, simply because she would lose the moral high ground."

Blanche was still staring at Wilhelmina's cottage, as if wishing she could peer through the walls to figure out what was transpiring inside.

Ultimately, she said, "Wilhelmina is the one who told."

"About what?" Cassandra asked.

"She told Warwick Stone about you and Jefferson, and he would have told Mrs. Smithwaite."

"How can you be certain?"

Her mother finally yanked her gaze from the window. "I just know."

Cassandra was stunned. "Why would she betray me? Why—after all these years?"

"Women do stupid things for men, as you proved by your behavior with Jefferson."

"He seduced me, Mother. How often must I repeat myself? I was practically an innocent bystander in the sordid debacle."

It was an old quarrel, one they'd rehashed a thousand times, so Blanche didn't bother launching into a tirade about it. Instead, she said, "There will have to be consequences."

"For who? For Wilhelmina?"

"Yes. We've been so kind to her, and this is how she repaid us."

"How will you deal with her?"

"I'll devise an appropriate remedy, so go away. I'd like to reflect in private."

"Once you've settled on her punishment, you must inform me what it is to be. If it's not harsh enough, I'd like to add to it. If I am to be deprived of a husband because of her, the price should be very steep."

"It will be. Now *go* away."

A hint of Blanche's usual temper flashed in her eyes, and Cassandra was relieved to observe it. She needed her mother fighting mad. Especially with her learning about Wilhelmina's perfidy.

What had her cousin been thinking? Why would she carry on like such an idiot? And for Warwick Stone! He wasn't worth it. How could Wilhelmina not recognize that fact?

Cassandra smirked with aggravation, then left in a huff. Her mother had

complained of a headache, but Cassandra had one too. A fierce one. Earlier that afternoon, Robert had brought a bottle of his mother's elixir, and she'd drunk it without saving any for later.

With the effects wearing off, she felt awful, so she had to sneak to a secluded parlor and refill her liquor flask. Then she'd climb to her room and down the contents.

Wilhelmina's treachery had been exposed, and Cassandra had to be alert and prepared, so she could ensure her mother implemented the proper plans.



"I SAW MISS DOBBS at the theater."

"How . . . nice."

Warwick didn't glance at Holden, but pretended to study his cards. They were seated at a table at *Ralston's* gambling club, and Warwick was struggling to remain interested in the game, but he couldn't focus.

Since Wilhelmina's departure, he'd been incredibly morose, but he wasn't a sentimental person. He'd decided to cure his doldrums by getting out of the house and engaging in the sorts of activities he typically relished, but no matter how hard he tried, his mood didn't improve.

He missed her desperately, and he wondered how long it would take for his pitiful disposition to wane. What if it never waned?

"She claimed she was there as your guest," Holden said, "but you were off somewhere in the crowd. I didn't bump into you."

"I was waylaid by Rowena in a dark hall." Warwick sneered with derision. "She's a piece of work, isn't she? I've never met a woman who was so blatantly debauched."

"I find it very refreshing. She has the tendencies of a whore, so I can suggest depraved acts, and I don't have to pay a penny to convince her to perform them."

There was some irreverent chuckling by the other players, as if Rowena was a tart they'd all sampled, and who could guess? Maybe she'd fornicated with half the city.

"I stopped by your apartment last week," Holden said, "but you'd traipsed off to the country. I bribed a footman to tell me where you were."

"Don't bribe my servants. I hate that."

"He apprised me you had escorted a young lady to your father's cottage."

The other players perked up, eager for lecherous details about his trip, but Warwick wasn't about to furnish any. He glared at Holden. "I might have visited the cottage, but despite my being a miserable rogue, I like to be considered a bit of a gentleman. We're not discussing it here."

Holden nodded. "I understand, but I hope you know what you're doing with her."

"I never know what I'm doing."

"Truer words were never spoken." Holden laughed, and the other men joined in. "You want to keep her identity a secret, but I'm aware of who she is."

"Bully for you, but if you take one more step down this road, I'm leaving. When I insisted I wouldn't discuss her, I meant it."

"I'm simply concerned about her."

"I can't imagine why."

"She might have some rough times approaching."

"Why would you assume that?"

"Haven't you heard the rumors about Cassandra Milton?"

"No, what about them?"

"They've spread all over town. Apparently, she had a child out of wedlock when she was seventeen. She and her mother hid it for years, while they paraded her around on the Marriage Market as if she was an innocent maiden."

The other men started avidly gossiping, each fellow piling on facts so every repetition was more foul. Warwick didn't supply the merest hint that he'd heard about it too—and directly from one of the parties involved in the incident.

"Doesn't your friend, Miss Dobbs, live with the Miltons?" Holden asked. "Isn't she a cousin or something?"

"Yes, she's a cousin," Warwick blandly affirmed.

"I'm just curious how the family is weathering the ordeal. I suspect it's stirring enormous drama on their end. How will Miss Milton's reputation ever recover? I can't fathom how it could be repaired."

One of the other players said, "Stone, didn't you meet with Miss Milton? Wasn't her mother eyeing you as a candidate for her daughter's hand? It sounds as if you dodged a bullet."

Warwick glowered furiously at Holden, then said, "Holden and I attended a hunt at their estate. I wasn't courting Miss Milton, and as to the gossip, I wouldn't dare speculate."

A servant walked up and slipped Warwick a note. He read it and grimaced, and Holden asked, "Is it bad news?"

"Probably. You'll have to excuse me gentlemen, but my father snuck in without my noticing, and I've been summoned to his private parlor."

They hooted and hurled taunts about how Warwick would be scolded for an infraction, as if he were still a boy in short pants. Neville was a notorious character, and his relationship with his three sons was fodder for people who were bored and didn't have anything better to do than palaver over matters that were none of their business.

"I'll stop by tomorrow," Holden said. "I'm anxious to learn more about your clandestine assignation with your mystery paramour."

"If you think that will be the topic, you needn't visit me. I have no desire to feed your salacious appetite."

He stood and left them to their brandy and cards. He went up the stairs to where the owner, Sybil, kept posh salons for her richer, more important members. Neville and his friends were some of London's premier citizens, but also some of the city's most infamous roudés.

For decades, they'd been the main libertines in any shocking love affair. They were lazy, imperious, and unrepentant, and while Warwick tried to esteem his father, as any son should, it was frequently difficult to be polite and obedient.

He didn't socialize with Neville all that often, and with Warwick being glum over Wilhelmina, he was too grouchy to be civil.

"Ah, there you are," Neville said as he entered the room, and he waved to an empty chair. "Will you join me?"

None of his acquaintances had arrived yet, so he was seated at a table by himself. There was a liquor decanter in the middle, glasses on a tray.

"I was busy with my own game," Warwick said, as he staggered over and plopped down. "What is it you need?"

Neville poured him a whiskey and slid it over. "You traveled to the country and used my cottage for a tryst."

"Are my servants spying on me for you? Will I have to fire someone to prevent you from poking your nose into my amours?"

"Your servants didn't tattle. Mine did. Was she worth it?"

"Yes, absolutely."

"Who was she?"

Warwick scoffed with offense. "As if I'd tell you."

"I'm dying of curiosity."

"How come you don't know who she is? Didn't your servants mention her name?"

"No, they didn't, and I have to hope it wasn't Miss Dobbs."

"You'll just have to wonder forever."

Neville looked a tad irked. "Was it Miss Dobbs?"

"What is your point, Neville? Why are you nagging?"

"I'm worried about you. That's all."

Warwick had just swallowed his drink, and he choked and sputtered. "You're *worried* about me? Would that be for the first time ever?"

"I observed the two of you that night at Hunter's party. Your affection for her was so obvious, and I simply feel you like her more than you should."

"What if I do like her? You're not my nanny, so why pester me?"

"If you grow too infatuated, you might behave stupidly."

"Well, I am your son," Warwick facetiously said, "so if I'm prone to idiotic conduct, I don't necessarily accept that it's my fault. I'm quite sure I inherited my horrid traits from you."

"*Touché*, but what if she winds up with child? What then?"

"Why would that concern you? If you're intending to shift the conversation in that direction, how about if I inquire as to how many bastards *you* have sired over the years? Hunter, Sheridan, and I have always debated."

"Four that I'm aware of," Neville casually stated, as if he was referring to puppies he'd abandoned by the side of the road.

"Four? Really? It's such a small number, and you're such a liar. I have no idea if I should believe you or not. For all I know, you might have sired a thousand, so you have some gall to lecture me about my fornication habits."

"I'm a scoundrel. I admit it, and I'm not a role model anyone should emulate. But we're not talking about me, so don't change the subject. What if she's increasing?"

Warwick sighed with frustration and nearly stomped out, but he imagined—if he declined to respond—Neville would harangue for weeks until Warwick supplied the answers he was seeking.

"I was careful," he claimed. "We spent several perfect days locked away together, but they're over. She went home, and I'm in London, and that's the end of it."

"Are you distraught over your separation?"

"Yes, I'm very distraught."

"Would you have wed her if I'd agreed you could?"

"Here's a tidbit I'm certain will shock you: I proposed to her, and I was prepared to proceed whether you liked it or not. That's how fond I was. I would have eloped to Scotland and come back a married man."

"You would have forged ahead without my permission?"

"Yes, but she refused me." Warwick gnawed on his cheek. "She doesn't think I'm much of a catch."

Neville huffed with affront, as if he was insulted on Warwick's behalf. "The woman is mad as a hatter, but then, so was her father, and lunacy runs in families."

"As *our* family has proved over and over."

Warwick downed his whiskey and would have left, but Neville delayed him by refilling his glass.

"While you were off philandering," Neville said, "I had a visitor. You'll never guess who it was." Warwick didn't try, and Neville added, "Blanche Milton."

"What did the old bat want?"

"She begged me to pressure you into marrying Cassandra."

Warwick's temper boiled. "You better not suppose you can command me into it. Is that why I was summoned? Are you about to order me to wed Cassandra Milton?"

"Gad no. I'd simply like to be informed as to what scandal Cassandra is concealing. Apparently, there is a dreadful story circulating, but I haven't learned the details. She's being crushed by gossip, and Blanche thought we could tamp it down by getting the two of you engaged."

"I hope you threw her in her carriage and sent her scurrying home."

"Yes, I sent her away, but what was Cassandra's sin? It must have been hideous for Blanche to be so frantic."

Neville stared him down, expecting him to spill all, but he didn't reply. He hadn't realized the rumor had spread, and he speculated over who had spread it. *He* had definitely never spoken about it.

Might it have been Holden? When they'd departed Hill Haven, Holden had mentioned seeing Wilhelmina and Cassandra in Scotland. He'd unraveled the truth, but Warwick couldn't picture him repeating the sorry tale. Rowena had heard Holden too, and if Warwick had to bet, he'd predict she was the culprit.

What would it mean for Wilhelmina? If Rowena had stirred trouble, could it impact her? Dare he write and warn her about it?

Even as the notion swirled, he shoved it away. She'd forbidden him to ever contact her, and besides, if Rowena had blabbed in London, how could it effect Wilhelmina in the country?

"I've been tucked away at your cottage," Warwick said, "so I possess no news about Cassandra or anything else."

"But what about when you were at Hill Haven? I'm sure you discovered what it was."

"I merely eavesdropped on the servants when they were complaining she drank too much, but I stumbled on no evidence that would verify they were correct."

Neville studied him, then smirked. "And you claim *I* am the liar."

"Let's just be relieved I didn't like her. Imagine the problems we'd be facing if I'd betrothed myself."

"I shall count our blessings, small though they are."

Warwick had finished his liquor, and when Neville tried to fill his glass a third time, he stood and stepped away. "I'm leaving. I have no desire to sit here and allow you to badger me."

"I wasn't badgering. I was chatting."

"No, you were badgering." He headed for the door, tossing over his shoulder, "Have a pleasant evening. Enjoy your friends."

"I will."

Warwick had nearly exited into the hall, when Neville called to him. He whipped around, his tone curt and aggravated. "Can't you let me go? Must you always have the last word?"

"I wanted to tell you that I like Miss Dobbs. I'm glad you had your holiday with her."

"You *like* Miss Dobbs? Are you feeling all right?"

"She's sassy and she's a fighter. I was impressed by her, and my goodness! She's the most gorgeous woman I've encountered in years. It's obvious why you're so obsessed. Have you planned another rendezvous?"

"No, we're through. She has . . . ah . . . responsibilities, that being people she supports, and she's bound by that obligation. She can't fritter her life away over a wretch like me." He laughed to take the sting out of his comment. "She clearly deduced how unreliable I can be, and I could hardly argue with her."

His father flashed a commiserating smile that Warwick couldn't bear to observe. He hurried out so he didn't have to hear whatever idiotic, placating remark Neville might have uttered next.



"ARE YOU CRYING?"

"No. I'm just tired."

"You look like you're crying."

Wilhelmina grinned at Charlie and ruffled his hair. She was in her bedroom, in her cottage at Hill Haven. A wave of grief had swept over her, and it had been so potent that it had brought her to her knees. She was on the floor, huddled by the bed, her cheek resting on the blanket.

He'd wandered by and had noticed her deplorable state.

She pulled him close and hugged him, squeezing tight. He'd been playing out in the garden, and she inhaled little boy smells of dirt and fresh air.

She had to remember why she'd come home, why she'd walked away from Warwick. She'd come for Charlie. And for Edna. She wasn't her father. She wasn't cunning, deceitful, and disloyal. She was *loyal*. Even when it was difficult, even when she was dead on the inside, she'd done the right thing.

He wasn't an affectionate child, and he squirmed away. He stared at her, his beautiful eyes brimming with concern.

"Don't be sad," he said.

"I guess I *am* sad, but I'm better now that you gave me a hug."

"Edna and I will take care of you."

"I know you will, so I'm very lucky."

He skipped off, and a few minutes later, Edna appeared in the doorway. She was alone, which was a relief. If Charlie had been with her, Wilhelmina would have had to maintain a cheery façade. Edna never expected cheer or deportment, so Wilhelmina didn't have to pretend.

"Charlie told me you were sick," Edna said. "He demanded I check on you. What's wrong?"

Wilhelmina was still collapsed, still on the floor and leaned against the bed. She didn't have the strength to push herself to her feet. "I think I'm dying."

Edna had never been a sympathetic person, and she clucked her tongue with disgust. “Dying of what?”

“Don’t worry. It’s only a broken heart.”

“Who broke it?”

“Warwick Stone. I dallied with him while I was in town.”

“I can understand why you would have,” Edna surprised her by saying. “I liked him. He’s . . . dashing.”

“Yes, he’s very dashing. For once, I couldn’t resist.”

“Why didn’t you stay in London then? Didn’t he ask you to? Or were you a passing fancy?”

“Actually, he begged me to stay, but I couldn’t abandon you and Charlie. Nor could I let Blanche find out I was involved with him. After he snubbed Cassandra, she would have killed me.”

“Yes, I suppose she would have.”

“I had no idea a human being could be so despondent. There are too many emotions rolling around in me, and I can’t figure out what to do with them.”

“They’ll fade. Gradually.”

“You sound so sure.”

“I loved your father. You’re aware of that. When he engaged in trysts, it killed me. Especially his last affair, with Cassandra. That one was the most galling of all. She was young and stupid, yet for several exhausting weeks, he preferred her to me. My poor ego still hasn’t recovered.”

“But have *you* recovered?”

“I was devastated by his death, but since then, I’ve been able to recollect that he was a pompous prick who didn’t deserve me.”

“I’m so distressed,” Wilhelmina said, “that I’m mystified as to why my heart is still beating.”

“Will there be a child from this? How reckless were you?”

Wilhelmina hesitated forever, reaching out mentally to perceive if any facet of her body seemed different, but she couldn’t sense any changes. Finally, she said, “It’s much too early to tell, isn’t it?”

“Probably, but you’d best pray you’re not increasing. If you are, I can’t protect you from Blanche.”

“I wouldn’t imagine you could.”

“Maybe you should have pondered the ramifications prior to your jumping

into this with Mr. Stone. You're too much like your father, so you have to be cautious about your choices. You're prone to negligence. Haven't I warned you to watch out?"

"Yes, you've warned me, but he was just so . . . so . . ." Wilhelmina cut off. "I'm not sorry."

Edna scoffed. "Of course you're not. Why would you be? You're Jefferson's daughter, so you never think of anyone but yourself."

"I thought of you. I thought of Charlie. I came back for you—when I could have left you behind."

"If Mr. Stone has planted a babe in your womb, how will that help us?"

Edna marched out, and Wilhelmina remained huddled on the floor. She was too bereaved to stand, too bereaved to breathe, too bereaved to keep on living. How many days would flow by before she could bear it? How many weeks? How many months?

What if she never stopped grieving? What then?



EDNA SAT AT THE dining table, her pulse pounding with dread.

She'd hitched her star to the wagon of the Dobbs family when she was a girl. She'd served Wilhelmina's mother, Edna's half-sister, who'd treated her like a peasant. On her demise, Edna had stayed on to raise Wilhelmina, but to be with Jefferson too.

She'd loved him madly, and when he'd seduced her, she'd been a naïve virgin who'd assumed carnal conduct meant he'd eventually marry her. She'd had to grow up very fast.

She'd trailed along in his shadow, reluctantly caring for Wilhelmina, while he philandered and disgraced himself in every possible way. In between his many amours, he'd glom onto Edna. He'd used her, had disrespected her, and she'd nearly packed her bags a thousand times, but she hadn't.

When she'd discovered his mischief with Cassandra, she'd been so angry. The only thing she'd ever craved in her life was a safe, secure home, but Jefferson had never been capable of providing it. He'd been too irresponsible.

After they'd moved to Hill Haven to reside with his cousins, her worries had eased. Then she'd stumbled on him with Cassandra! She'd fought with him, had accused him of not being concerned over what might happen to her and Wilhelmina

if his affair was exposed. He'd laughed and bragged that he wasn't concerned.

He'd been drunk and staggering around. If he'd been sober, she liked to believe he would never have voiced such a horrible comment. She'd slapped him, hard, the violence surprising her.

They'd been out by the creek behind the cottage, and because he'd been so inebriated, he'd tripped and had tumbled down the embankment. At the bottom, he'd hit his head on a rock, and it had killed him. Yet, in the heat of the moment, she hadn't realized what had occurred.

She'd struck her blow, then had stomped off, and she hadn't fretted about him. She'd suspected he was off with Cassandra and generally being an idiot. His death had stunned her.

She'd never mentioned their quarrel to a single soul, and she'd take the story to her grave, but when she'd gone to such dire lengths to retain their lodging, how was she to assess Wilhelmina's fling? It wasn't a secret that could be kept, and when Mrs. Milton learned of it, they'd be tossed out on the road.

For most of three decades, Edna had been buffeted by the whims of Jefferson and Wilhelmina Dobbs. Over the years, Wilhelmina had usually behaved herself, but Edna had always seen Jefferson's traits lurking below the surface. She'd constantly instructed her to tamp them down, but to Edna's great dismay, Wilhelmina had forgotten those admonitions.

She'd fallen for Mr. Stone, had risked all for passion. Well, Edna could have told her that *passion* was like fairy dust. It wasn't real. A woman couldn't grab onto it and turn it into an item of value.

Gad, what if Wilhelmina was increasing? What then?

Edna was practically sick with regret over what the consequences would be. If Wilhelmina wanted to ruin herself and incur Mrs. Milton's wrath, why should Edna suffer for it? She hadn't committed any transgressions. How could she protect herself?

Charlie bustled in, and he was holding a sketch. He waved it at her and said, "Look what I found!"

Edna glanced at it, then blanched. "Where did you get that?"

"Wilhelmina's folder was in the studio. Isn't that her friend, Mr. Stone? It's a very good drawing of him. Shall I tell her it is? She might feel better."

"No, she's tired. Leave her be."

Edna slipped the paper from his hand to hers, and she laid it face down on the table. He hadn't seemed to notice that Mr. Stone was naked. Wilhelmina had posed

him on a bed, his private areas casually concealed by a sheet.

“Why don’t you run in the garden again?” she said to him.

“May I have cake later?”

“Yes, you may have two slices, if you’re quiet and promise you won’t bother Wilhelmina.”

He dashed out, having already lost interest in the drawing, but then, his mind worked in odd ways. His thoughts jumped around, as Jefferson’s had jumped. It’s why Edna figured he would have trouble as an adult. He couldn’t focus like an ordinary person.

She turned the sketch over, studying it as she furiously debated. It vividly captured the virile man, as well as Wilhelmina’s deep affection for him. Her fondness leapt off the page.

This was a calamity that would crash down on Wilhelmina. Edna had no doubt about it, and Wilhelmina was too bereft to brace herself for the danger that was approaching. Edna was paid to tattle about Wilhelmina. Wasn’t this the precise sort of topic for which she was compensated?

If there was a chance that Wilhelmina could wind up pregnant, shouldn’t Mrs. Milton be notified before the worst transpired? If Edna confided about Mr. Stone, wouldn’t Edna’s candor shield her when Mrs. Milton lashed out?

Obviously, Edna couldn’t remain silent. She couldn’t be part of any conspiracy where Wilhelmina tricked or deceived Mrs. Milton. The old harpy let Edna live at the estate because Edna did the job she was remunerated to do.

Her views clear, her decision reached, she folded the picture in half, then stood and started for the manor.

Chapter Twenty-One



WILHELMINA TREKKED DOWN THE lane toward Hill Haven. It was a brisk autumn afternoon, the wind whipping angry clouds across the sky. There was a chill in the air, the seasons about to change, and winter would arrive.

Winter was a trying period for her, where she felt particularly claustrophobic. When she was trapped inside, she obsessed over Italy and other locales where the temperature was hot and the sun always shone.

Why hadn't she fled to one of them and stayed there?

She'd been out for most of the day and was just getting home. A neighbor had contacted her to discuss the possibility of her painting the woman's two daughters. Wilhelmina was rarely asked to paint anyone, so she'd gone for an interview.

She'd taken her artistic materials and had sketched the girls for their mother, letting her see that she could really draw. People heard she could, but they were amazed when they discovered she, being a female, had any talent.

The mother was pondering her decision, and Wilhelmina had offered to complete the job for free. She needed a chore that would keep her mind and hands busy. Since her trip to town had ended, her old feelings of wanderlust had bubbled to the surface, and she couldn't tamp them down.

Wild ideas were overwhelming her: She wanted to race to London and tell Warwick she shouldn't have refused him. She wanted to jump back into his bed and his life. No, she *didn't* want that. Instead, she wanted to head to the coast and book passage on the first ship sailing south. She wanted . . . and wanted . . . and wanted . . .

She was annoyed, frustrated, and ridiculously weepy. If she had a reason to paint a portrait, she was certain some of her riotous yearnings would wane.

She skirted the manor and crossed the garden to the cottage. To her surprise, the drapes were closed, some of the shutters too. She opened the door and entered the

vestibule, shivering when she found the fires not lit.

“Edna?” she called. “Charlie? Are you here?”

There was no answer, and an odd tension was swirling, as if the residence had been empty for ages.

“Edna!” she called again, listening for footsteps, but it was quiet as a tomb.

She walked into the front parlor, and she leapt with alarm as she practically bumped into a footman who’d been lurking in the corner. His nose was red from the cold, and he looked frozen. How long had he been loafing in the icy house?

“Hello, Miss Dobbs,” he said. “I’m sorry to frighten you, but you have to speak with Mrs. Milton. Immediately.”

“Where is everybody? What’s happened?”

“I’m not aware of an incident. I was just sent over to give you the message, to wait until you returned, so you’d receive it right away.”

“I’ll put down my things, then I’ll follow you.”

“Will you be there shortly? I don’t mean to be impertinent, but she was a tad impatient, so I don’t believe you should delay. May I inform her you’re coming?”

“Yes, yes, I’m coming.”

She shoed him out, and he didn’t dawdle, but was relieved to escape.

She quickly toured the downstairs rooms, searching for a note from Edna that would indicate where she was, but there was no message. She sighed with aggravation, wishing she had time to relax and warm up, but Blanche never liked to be ignored.

She left the cottage, and the path to the manor led her by her studio, and as she neared it, she staggered to a halt. The windows had been smashed out, as if brigands had grabbed a sledgehammer and chopped at them in a frenzy.

The sight was so bizarre, the act so needlessly irresponsible, that she couldn’t process what she was witnessing. The glass would be so expensive to replace. Who would behave so egregiously? Was this reckless destruction what Blanche planned to address?

The small structure had originally been a shed her father had converted, and he’d produced some brilliant work in it. Blanche had been so fond of Jefferson, and she’d paid for the remodeling. She’d done it for him, not for Wilhelmina, so she would never repair it. With a sinking feeling, she grasped that her days of painting at Hill Haven were likely over.

A wave of dread swamped her, and she stared at the manor, studying how it loomed over the surrounding countryside. In the past, she’d thought it was a lovely

building, with fine lines and a delicate balancing of architecture, but currently, it appeared incredibly sinister, like an asylum or a dungeon.

She was anxious to investigate the damage in her studio, but Blanche would be furtively watching her, so she continued on. She reached the verandah and climbed up to a rear entrance. The footman who'd met her at the cottage ushered her in.

"Mrs. Milton is in her office," he said. "Shall I escort you? Shall I announce you?"

"No, I'm sure she knows I'm here."

She hurried by him, marching down various halls to Blanche's door. Blanche was seated at her desk, and there was a chair across from her, so evidently, they would have a caustic discussion. She peered about, expecting Edna and Charlie to be present, but they weren't, and her perception of disaster soared to a terrifying height.

"There you are," Blanche said. "Finally."

Wilhelmina stomped in and plopped down. Blanche's expression was hard and cruel, increasing Wilhelmina's concern that a calamity must have occurred. She began the conversation, hoping to lower the sense that she and Blanche were fighting. Why would they be? Wilhelmina couldn't remember when they'd last talked.

"I didn't realize you were keen to speak with me," she said. "I went to an interview about a commission."

"Yes, I arranged it so you'd be gone for a few hours."

The comment was extremely disturbing. "Have you seen Edna or Charlie? I stopped by the cottage, but it was deserted."

"Yes, I've seen them." Blanche included nothing more.

"What's wrong? You're scaring me. Were you aware that my studio has been vandalized?"

"Yes, I ordered it. It is my specific intent that no person will utilize that shed for creative purposes ever again. I will be no artist's patron. I will suffer no artist to toil away on my property. Not ever."

"What are you blathering on about? You begged us to move here. You wanted us to use it. Have I upset you somehow? If so, I'm ignorant of any transgression."

"I've had enough. Of your despicable father. Of you and your bastard brother."

Wilhelmina blew out a heavy breath. "Obviously, I've committed an offense that has infuriated you. What is it? Don't keep me in suspense."

Blanche opened a drawer, and she pulled out a piece of sketching paper. She

laid it on the desk between them. If Wilhelmina had been thinking clearly, she'd have prevented any reaction, but she couldn't conceal a wince. It was one of her nude drawings of Warwick.

It was a very private portrait, and she yearned to snatch it away and tuck it in her cloak. She could have shouted at Blanche and demanded to be apprised of how she'd stumbled on it. She could have claimed she had no idea who had drawn it, but from how Blanche was glaring, they were far beyond denials.

Blanche let her get a good look at it, then she yanked it away and stuck it back in the drawer.

"Warwick Stone traveled to Hill Haven," Blanche said, "to assess Cassandra with an eye toward marriage. You stole him from her."

"No, I didn't. He would never have wed her. She was too young and immature."

"You seduced him. Right under my nose!"

"I didn't. I swear."

"Then you slithered to town so you could disgrace yourself with him a bit more."

"It wasn't like that," Wilhelmina insisted.

"You told him about Cassandra and Jefferson, then he turned around and told the whole world."

"I didn't tell him! Don't you dare accuse me!"

Wilhelmina had to glance away for, of course, she'd told him. He'd promised to keep her secret, and she couldn't guess if he had or not. She'd been too afraid to inquire.

"I've been struggling to figure out why you would confide in him," Blanche said. "After all this time, why now? Why him? Well, the answer was easy to deduce: You've pretended to be a fallen woman, and you couldn't bear to have him presume you were. So . . . you saved yourself, while you threw Cassandra and me to the wolves. We are destroyed—because of you."

"It would be pointless to state again that I didn't tattle. You wouldn't believe me anyway."

"Harlot."

"Oh, Blanche. Please don't call me names. It wounds me so much."

Blanche was too enraged to heed her. "I brought you and Jefferson into my home, and despite his mischief with Cassandra, I allowed you to stay. I allowed you to

have the cottage. All you had to do was remain silent.”

“What can I say except that I’m sorry?”

“Have you any notion of the consequences of your recklessness? I will probably have to send Cassandra out of the country over this. The situation is that bad. She may never marry. Thanks to you! Are you happy? Are you proud of yourself?”

“No, I’m not proud. I’m very sad.”

“Was Warwick Stone worth it?” Blanche asked.

Wilhelmina couldn’t admit that he had been, so she said, “I liked him very much. From the moment we met, we just had a spark that pulled us together.”

“Did he claim he’d wed you? Is that how he convinced you to lift your skirt?”

Wilhelmina thought it would be dangerous to confess that he’d proposed, so she lied. “No, he didn’t claim he’d wed me.”

“He never would have, and that’s the truth. He is a cad—like his depraved father. The men of the Stone family ruin girls like you for sport. They revel in it. They take bets over it, but then, your father was the same, so I don’t imagine you’re surprised to hear about the conduct of scoundrels.”

Wilhelmina was weary of being scolded, and she tried to change the subject. “Where are Edna and Charlie?”

Blanche didn’t respond to the question, but posed one of her own. “Are you increasing? Are we about to have another bastard boy at Hill Haven?”

Wilhelmina’s cheeks heated, and she peered down at her hands. When she’d been locked away with Warwick, their amour had seemed fun, wicked, and amazing. But with Blanche confronting her, she simply felt humiliated and ashamed.

She liked to view herself as modern and independent, but she knew right from wrong, knew sin from morality. No matter how fervidly she wished it were otherwise, a woman’s behavior was strictly circumscribed.

No female could blithely fornicate and birth a bastard. Societal rules prohibited it. Church teachings forbade it. The Law declared it a crime. She could be arrested and jailed for her illicit fling.

She’d like to insist her affair was her own business, that Blanche had an incredible amount of gall to lecture and interrogate. Blanche had no authority over Wilhelmina, but Wilhelmina’s life was intertwined with hers. They had been ensnared the minute her father’s seduction of Cassandra had been exposed.

Wilhelmina had jumped in to help hide the debacle in a manner that was perverted and stupid. She’d assumed burdens she shouldn’t have had to carry. She’d

been young and had made idiotic choices. Blanche had tricked and manipulated her, and she liked to suppose—if the same choices were presented now—she might have walked in a different direction, but how could she have?

Charlie was her father's only son, and he was Wilhelmina's only sibling. She couldn't have let Blanche arrange an awful conclusion for him.

Blanche's sharp voice slashed through Wilhelmina's miserable rumination.

"Answer me! Are you increasing?"

Wilhelmina's cheeks heated even further. "My monthlies aren't regular, so I'm not sure."

"I have sent Charlie and Edna away," was Blanche's reply. "They won't ever be back."

"You didn't have my permission for that."

Blanche scoffed with disgust. "This is my home and my property. Why would I need your permission to determine who lives here and who doesn't?"

"Where are they?"

"I will inform you shortly—after we come to terms with regard to several issues."

"Tell me where they are!"

"No, and this is how we will proceed. No portion of it is negotiable. You will agree to all of it or I will wash my hands of you. I should cut you loose anyway, but I won't. Fool that I am, I loved Jefferson, and I will display a last burst of kindness—for him."

Wilhelmina nearly leapt across the desk and pummeled Blanche. She had her father's temper and swings of mood, but she wasn't a brawler, so she took deep breaths, calming her fury, so she could stagger through the dreadful appointment before it grew even more nauseating.

"What is it you would like me to do?" she asked. "If it's within my power, I will oblige you."

"You will travel to Scotland immediately," Blanche said, "to the cottage I own there, the one where you went with Cassandra."

"Why would I?"

"I have previously been forced to deal with the scandal of you being an unwed mother."

"Yes, but we both know I am not an unwed mother."

"Everyone in a ten-mile radius believes you are. Are you figuring you can tarry

at Hill Haven while your belly swells and your condition is revealed to the world? I will not have it!”

Wilhelmina sighed with dismay. “There’s no reason I can’t stay. If my situation becomes . . . ah . . . a problem, I can leave then.”

“No. You will conceal yourself from decent people, in Scotland, until we are certain of the outcome. I will not have this rub off on me. Not with Cassandra’s past sins being bandied by every gossipmonger in the city. You will not disgrace me.”

“I have no desire to travel there. Winter is almost upon us, and I refuse to be trapped in that cold, barren wasteland. You are not my mother, Blanche. You can’t order me to obey you as you would Cassandra.”

“Fine. I will set your bags out on the road and lock the doors behind you. You’ll never see Charlie and Edna again. I will never admit where they are, and you can tromp down the road with night approaching.”

Blanche was cruel enough that she might act that way. It wasn’t an idle threat.

“If I scurry to Scotland,” Wilhelmina asked, “and it turns out I’m increasing, what then?”

“You will birth the child, then I will help you deliver it to the nuns so they can place it out for adoption.”

Wilhelmina’s heart seized in her chest. She’d never pictured herself as a particularly maternal person, but the notion of giving her baby away was terrifying.

“I would never do that.”

“Then you’d have a bastard to raise, but I can’t fathom how you would. I wouldn’t welcome you back at Hill Haven, so you’d be on your own. Think carefully, Wilhelmina. You never make good decisions, but this might be a moment when you should.”

“If the worst occurred, I could contact Warwick. He’d assist me.”

“Warwick Stone would assist you?” Blanche’s laugh was eerie and cynical. “Are you joking? He already has six natural children—and that’s just the ones I’ve learned about. If you’re about to spit out another, why would he be concerned about it?”

“He doesn’t have any natural children!” Wilhelmina huffed.

“Gad, you really are naïve, aren’t you? Before I ever invited him to meet Cassandra, I had him investigated. Can you imagine I wouldn’t have? I uncovered all his dirty little secrets, including his affairs, mistresses, and bastards, but you are sitting there with stars in your eyes, presuming he might save you from your folly.”

“He was fond of me.”

“Was he? I guess I should inform you that, when I was in London last week, I attended a party at Lord Swindon’s house. Your precious, Warwick, was there with that trollop, Rowena Smithwaite.”

“That’s a lie.”

“Is it? Evidently, they’ve been keeping company, and there are rumors they may marry. It’s what Lord Swindon supposed. Neville likes her very much. She’s rich, has stellar bloodlines, and she owns tons of land that could become Warwick’s if he wed her. Neville is delighted by the prospect.”

If Blanche had pulled out a knife and stabbed her, Wilhelmina couldn’t have been any more stunned. She recalled her final night in London, at the theater, when Warwick had been huddled in a dark corner with Mrs. Smithwaite.

They’d looked cozy and affectionate, and Wilhelmina had told herself to remember he was a cad who always had paramours. She hadn’t been surprised to find that he might have been dallying with Mrs. Smithwaite, but he might wed the gorgeous widow? His father, Lord Swindon, was excited about it?

If that was correct, where did Wilhelmina fit in that sordid scenario? It meant Warwick had flitted off to the country with her, while he was courting Mrs. Smithwaite. Could he be that callous? That debauched?

He’d seemed sincere when he’d proposed, but in the end, might he have tricked her with a fake ring, a fake preacher, and a fake wedding?

It happened to unsuspecting females when they involved themselves with scoundrels. Had Wilhelmina been duped? Was she blind? Was she confused about what had bubbled up between them?

With Charlie and Edna missing, and Blanche blathering on in despicable ways, everything was transpiring too fast. She was too dazed to reason out the facts.

Blanche twisted the knife a bit deeper. “In comparison to Mrs. Smithwaite and what she could bring to the table in a marriage, what have you to recommend yourself?”

“He loved me.” When Wilhelmina stated it aloud, she sounded pathetic and ridiculous.

“Will you run to town and throw yourself on his mercy?” Blanche asked. “Will you embarrass yourself by arriving to divulge your dilemma just as his engagement is being announced? How would your news be received? Mrs. Smithwaite doesn’t seem very understanding to me. How might she lash out at an unattached, poverty-stricken woman such as yourself?”

Wilhelmina stared down at the floor, her mind whirring with options, with questions. She felt very much alone, under too much pressure, and not able to devise any solutions. She was afraid of Blanche and didn't trust her. She was afraid for Charlie and Edna too. What might Blanche have done to them?

"I better go to London," she said. "I should talk to Warwick about this."

"So go." Blanche waved to the door. "I'm not stopping you. Your bags have been packed, and they're out in the foyer."

"I have to swing by the cottage, to check that I haven't left anything important behind."

"No. After you walk out of this room, you will depart my home forever. You will not swing by the cottage. You will not loiter on my property."

"I want my father's paintings."

"You can't have them. I shall keep them as payment for all the money I have wasted on you and your brother."

"You can't keep them!"

Blanche smirked. "Sue me in court. See how far you get."

"Where are Charlie and Edna?"

"I will tell you their location—if you leave for Scotland. If you will hide yourself away until we can learn if you are disgraced, I will tell you then. But only then, and I'm not even sure why I would. I suppose, again, it's because I loved Jefferson, even though he was mad, even though he ruined my family. I will do it for him, but that is all I will do."

"And if I'd rather head to town?"

"You're free to carry on however you like."

"I could bring Warwick here. He could make you confess where Edna and Charlie have gone."

"I shall declare Edna to be a kidnapper and that I have no idea where she went. You will never find them."

"I don't think I'm increasing," Wilhelmina said.

She wished she had more arrows in her quiver, but she lived on the sharp edge of Blanche's generosity. If Blanche decided to kick her out on the spur of the moment, Wilhelmina had no power to prevent it.

"It doesn't matter what you *think* about your condition," Blanche told her. "You will not loaf and have your shame gradually revealed to the neighbors. If you would like to scurry to London to beg Warwick Stone for assistance, then I'll say

Godspeed and good luck.”

Wilhelmina tried to envision herself in the city, chasing after Warwick, explaining her situation. What if he was about to betroth himself to Rowena Smithwaite? Then what would Wilhelmina do? If she discovered he was treacherous, if she discovered he'd deceived her, she truly suspected her heart might quit beating.

“I’ve hired a carriage,” Blanche said, “so you can start your journey to Scotland immediately. There are still several hours of daylight, so you can put many miles between yourself and Hill Haven, and that is my intent. I am done fussing with you. Or you can proceed to town on your own, but I won’t aid you in that fruitless quest. What is it to be?”

Wilhelmina felt young and out of her element, trapped in the very position she’d been in when Blanche had coerced her into claiming *she* was Charlie’s mother. She was seven years older, but apparently, she wasn’t any smarter or wiser.

“Swear to me,” she said, “that Charlie and Edna are safe.”

“They’re safe—for now. If you flee to Scotland until we’re positive you’ve dodged a bullet, I will provide coach fare to their new residence.”

“Swear that I’ll see them after I’ve exiled myself.”

“Yes, I swear.” Blanche appeared calm and firm, and it was impossible to discern if she was lying. Was she? Wasn’t she?

“I . . . I . . . will go to Scotland,” Wilhelmina stammered, forcing out the words before she changed her mind.

“Excellent.”

Blanche rang a bell to summon a servant. Shortly, booted strides echoed in the hall. Two men marched in, but they weren’t Blanche’s servants. They were burly and tough-looking, as if they were guards.

“She will accompany you,” Blanche said, “and she’s departing at once. Escort her out to your carriage.”

“If you’ll come with us, Miss Dobbs?” one of them said.

Their casual attitude made it clear that Blanche had been planning this for quite a while. Wilhelmina glared at her and tried to think of a parting comment, but nothing seemed appropriate. If she’d been more gracious, she’d have thanked Blanche for her support, but she’d given up a lot for Blanche Milton.

Why thank her for the dubious boons she’d supplied? Wilhelmina had earned every one of them.

She rose and stormed off to the front of the house. The two guards trailed

after her, their focus acute, as if they were worried she'd escape. Were they really conveying her to Scotland? Well, why wouldn't they?

She didn't agree with Blanche on much, but she recognized that she couldn't tarry at Hill Haven and risk another scandal. She was already a pariah due to her being an unwed mother. If rumors circulated that she was about to birth a second bastard, she would likely be arrested for illicit fornication. She'd be compelled to identify her seducer, which would drag the aristocratic Stone family into it.

If all of her luck was bad, she might wind up transported to the penal colonies as a harlot.

So . . . she would slink away from England and let the chips fall where they would.



BLANCHE STOOD IN THE grass outside the shed she'd remodeled for Jefferson. By the time he'd begun using it, his drinking had been so out of control that he'd rarely worked. Wilhelmina had utilized the space more productively than he ever had. She'd toiled away, honing her talent, practicing, getting better.

But what good was a female artist? By the very nature of her being a female, her endeavors were deemed inferior.

The studio had been crammed full of her paintings. Along some walls, they'd been stacked ten deep, a testament to wasted energy and effort.

"Is that the last of them?" Blanche asked a footman as he approached.

"Yes, ma'am," the young man said.

"Toss it on the pile, then light a taper for me."

He was carrying a small portrait of Charlie. He'd been posed in a bed of flowers, appearing merry and impish. Fleeting, Blanche wondered if she shouldn't keep it. After all, despite how she pretended, he was her only grandson. Why not have a token to remember him by?

She scoffed and shook the prospect away. In a few hours, there would be no physical evidence that Charlie Dobbs existed.

She had five mounds of Wilhelmina's canvases arranged on the grass, and Blanche would burn them to ash. Wilhelmina didn't care about much, but she cared about her canvases, so Blanche would destroy them. It was the best method to hurt

her. There was no reason to suppose Wilhelmina would ever hear of Blanche's great bonfire, but that wasn't the point. Blanche would have the pleasure of recollecting what had happened.

She snorted with derision. It had been so easy to trick and coerce Wilhelmina, but no one who knew the truth about Cassandra, that being Edna and Wilhelmina, could be allowed to endanger Blanche's tranquility any further.

Wilhelmina assumed Edna was her friend, but Edna was Blanche's employee. Blanche had paid her to vanish with the child. Edna had always been greedy, so it had been simple to persuade her to betray Wilhelmina. With money on the table, she'd scooped it up and left.

She could never slither back. If she tried, Blanche had warned her that she would consider it blackmail, and she'd have Edna prosecuted. Blanche couldn't guess if she could do that, but Edna had certainly believed it was possible. Blanche was rich and important, so avaricious, quivering Edna had run away in fear.

Blanche had told Wilhelmina that she'd be reunited with them after her exile was over, but in reality, Blanche had no idea where Edna had gone. If anyone ever inquired, she could sincerely declare that Edna had taken Charlie without Wilhelmina's permission, and Blanche had no other information.

As to Wilhelmina, her folly with Warwick Stone had been the perfect excuse to evict her. She would travel to Blanche's cottage in Scotland, and Blanche had people there to report on her condition.

If she was increasing, or if she wasn't, the answer hardly mattered. Wilhelmina would never return to England, and in fact, she wouldn't be in Scotland very long either. In the future, Edna and Wilhelmina would never be available to confirm any rumors about Cassandra.

Blanche was about to commence a campaign to restore Cassandra's reputation, and she would begin with the news that there was no blond boy residing at Hill Haven, that Mrs. Smithwaite was a liar. Signs of Wilhelmina's presence at Hill Haven were about to be wiped away too, starting with her many paintings.

The footman brought her a taper, and she walked about, lighting a fire under each stack of canvases. They'd placed them on beds of hay, so there would be a quick ignition. As the flames were catching, Cassandra strolled up.

"What are you doing, Mother?"

"I am ridding us of any proof that Wilhelmina ever lived here."

"You're burning her paintings? That is so spiteful."

Blanche nodded. “Yes, it is, but I’m eager to wound her in the most painful way I can. I thought this was the most satisfying option.”

“Some of them are very good,” Cassandra said. “Shouldn’t we pluck out the ones that we like?”

“None of them were any good,” Blanche replied with a grim finality. “She never accomplished anything that is worth celebrating.”

The flames were growing, wooden frames cracking apart, sparks sailing through the air. Once the piles were fully engulfed, she ordered the footman to tend them, then to apprise her when the job was finished.

Wilhelmina hadn’t been much of a fixture at the estate. She’d been too peculiar, so if he had an opinion about Blanche’s vicious destruction, he kept it carefully hidden.

“I’ve seen enough,” Blanche said to Cassandra. “Let’s go inside.”

“I’d like to watch for a bit. The fires are so pretty.”

“Suit yourself.”

Blanche spun away and marched off, and Cassandra called, “Do you imagine Wilhelmina will have learned her lesson from this?”

“Oh, yes. She’ll have learned it—for *I* am a very proficient teacher.”

Chapter Twenty-Two



"I SHOULD LIKE TO speak with Mr. Warwick Stone. Is this where I would find him?"

"This is his father's house. Lord Swindon's residence?"

Edna Stewart stared at the footman who'd answered the door. She couldn't imagine that an exalted person such as Lord Swindon would meet with her, so what was best?

"Does Mr. Stone live with his father?" she asked.

"No, he has his own lodging."

"I'm not from London," she said, "so I'm not familiar with the neighborhoods. A man at the coaching inn sent us here, and it's very presumptuous of me, but I desperately need to talk to him. Could you direct me to his home? Would that be possible?"

She wondered what he thought. She was bedraggled from her incessant traveling. Charlie was at her side, and he was growing restless. At the start, he'd been eager to leave Hill Haven, deeming it a grand adventure, but now, he was simply exhausted and grouchy. He kept asking after Wilhelmina, demanding to know where she was and why she hadn't come with them.

Edna should have realized it wouldn't be easy to abscond with him. He was a difficult boy to manage, and after several days on the road, he was becoming especially cranky.

The footman was taking furtive glances at Charlie. Was he speculating that Charlie was a bastard who'd suddenly appeared on their stoop? If it rendered her an appointment with Mr. Stone, then she would let the suspicion fester.

"What is your name, ma'am?" the footman inquired.

"Miss Edna Stewart? From Hill Haven? It's the country estate of Mrs. Blanche Milton. I'm companion to Miss Wilhelmina Dobbs who is Mrs. Milton's cousin. Miss Dobbs is a great friend of Mr. Stone, and I have to brazenly request his assistance on

her behalf.” She gestured to Charlie. “This is Charlie. Mr. Stone is acquainted with him.”

Charlie chimed in with, “He promised to teach me to hunt, but we can’t begin until I’m bigger.”

She allowed the implication to swirl that Charlie was Mr. Stone’s son. It was a deceptive insinuation, but recently, she’d engaged in so many despicable acts. What was one more little lie?

“Would you wait here?” the footman said. “I should confer with the butler. He’ll sort out the kind of aid we can provide to you.”

He shut the door in her face, and she should have been offended. If he’d had any manners, he’d have ushered them inside, but she understood his reservations. He wouldn’t permit her to deliver a bastard unless someone higher up approved it. It was cold and drizzling though, and she hoped the response would arrive swiftly.

“I’m hungry,” Charlie said. “Will we eat soon?”

“Yes, soon.”

“Are we staying or what?”

“I can’t guess what’s happening.”

“I’m freezing too. Just open the door and walk in. They won’t mind; I’m sure of it.”

It was typical that he’d suppose he could barge in. He was a Dobbs so he carried on like a spoiled prince, and with Cassandra Milton being his mother, Edna figured there had to have been royalty in the Milton bloodline. Her son was that imperious.

“We haven’t been invited,” she said. “We can’t be rude.”

“I want to go home.”

“So do I,” Edna muttered. But where was home?

She was trying to make sense of her agreement with Blanche Milton. When she’d tattled about Wilhelmina, she hadn’t exactly known what to expect. In a vague way, she’d envisioned Mrs. Milton scolding Wilhelmina, then punishing her in some fashion.

Instead, after significant reflection, Mrs. Milton had announced that Charlie had to vanish. She would have no witnesses on the property who could verify the gossip about Cassandra.

She had offered Edna an astonishing amount of money—more money than Edna had ever pictured having in her life—if Edna would flee with Charlie. She’d had

to sneak away quickly and quietly, and she'd had to swear she'd never return. She hadn't been able to resist the money, and with hardly a thought as to the consequences, she'd scooped it up and had run away.

For decades, Edna had fostered grievances, first against Wilhelmina's mother, then Jefferson, then Wilhelmina. She'd persuaded herself that she'd been abused by them and had blamed them for her perpetual misery.

After Charlie had been born, Edna wasn't the one who'd begged Blanche Milton not to place him in an orphanage. Wilhelmina had begged, yet after the bargain had been struck, the burden of caring for him had landed on Edna, and she'd always resented it.

Mrs. Milton had furnished her with the chance to disappear, and she'd viewed it as a miracle that would convey her to the better future she'd yearned to have. She'd presumed, if she could just escape Jefferson and Wilhelmina, her life would be marvelous, that somehow, *they* had caused her woe. But as she'd journeyed away from Hill Haven, she'd had no idea where she was headed.

Gradually, it had dawned on her that there was no path that didn't include Wilhelmina. Edna had fallen into the Dobbs' world when her half-sister had married Jefferson. As a result, she'd traveled across Europe with him, had slept in palaces, had seen kings and been introduced to duchesses.

Through it all, she'd never paused to realize how lucky she was to have had those experiences. She'd hated Jefferson for not being perfect. She'd hated Wilhelmina for being different, for not being boring and dull like Edna.

Jefferson had been dashing and exotic, had enchanted everyone he'd ever met. Wilhelmina was the same: a seductive, unusual beauty who wasn't like any other female. Why constantly chastise her? Why bring her down to Edna's level?

Wilhelmina was special and amazing, so why had Edna demanded she lower herself?

Edna had had no right to abscond with Charlie, so what had she been thinking? She hadn't been thinking. That was the problem. She had no ability to live on her own. Ever since she was a girl, the Dobbs family had supported her.

She didn't know if Wilhelmina would ever forgive her, and she was very ashamed of herself. She had to fix her treachery, but wasn't certain how.

When she'd departed Hill Haven, Mrs. Milton had been so angry, and Edna was terrified over how she might have lashed out at Wilhelmina. She was afraid of Mrs. Milton, and she needed a champion on her side who could supply advice and

assistance.

So . . . she'd hurried to London to seek out Mr. Stone. He had the power to pester Mrs. Milton, to learn where Wilhelmina was, for Edna had no doubt that she wouldn't still be at Hill Haven. Mrs. Milton wouldn't have let her remain, so where could she be? How might Mrs. Milton have retaliated for the rumors that were spreading?

Edna wasn't positive that Mr. Stone would help her. She couldn't predict how he felt about Wilhelmina, but she'd observed Wilhelmina's affection for *him*. She hoped there was lingering fondness on his part, but if he wasn't concerned about Wilhelmina and didn't wish to intervene, Edna couldn't imagine what she'd do next.

The door opened, and an older servant whom she assumed was the butler, poked his nose out.

"Miss Stewart?" he said. "Mr. Stone is here, visiting his father. He's agreed to meet with you. Won't you come in?"



WARWICK RUSHED DOWN HIS father's stairs, his alarm growing by leaps and bounds. When Neville's butler had explained who'd arrived, Warwick had been stunned. What could have happened?

"Miss Stewart!" he called down to her as he kept descending. "You are the very last person I would have ever expected to show up in London, so this is an enormous shock."

"I apologize for bothering you, but I couldn't decide where else to turn."

"Well, that news frightens me." He looked at Charlie who was studying the entry hall with an artist's eye. His stance and expression were just like Wilhelmina's when she was posed in front of a canvas. "Hello, Charlie. It's nice to see you again."

"We moved away," he bluntly stated, "and I don't like it. I want to go home."

Warwick raised a brow at Miss Stewart, then said to the butler, "Why don't you take Charlie to the kitchen and find him something to eat? I have to chat with Miss Stewart."

"Charlie, are you hungry?" the butler asked.

"I'm starving," Charlie said, and he glanced at Warwick. "Will you send a note to Wilhelmina to tell her where I am? I'm sure she's upset that I left."

“I will do that,” Warwick told him. “Now then, we’ll get you some food, and I’ll fetch you after I’ve finished with Miss Stewart.”

Charlie went without any complaint, and Warwick dawdled until he’d disappeared. Then he guided Miss Stewart into the receiving parlor and gestured for her to sit on the sofa by the fire. He stood, feet braced, arms behind his back, as if he was still in the army and about to interrogate a prisoner.

“I’m betting you have a lengthy tale to share,” he said, “but let’s cut to the chase. Why are you in London with Charlie? And where is Wilhelmina?”

“Oh, Mr. Stone, I’ve behaved hideously, and I pray you will help me before my blunder is too big to repair.”



NEVILLE’S GRAND COACH RATTLED to a halt at Hill Haven Manor. Warwick jumped out without waiting for a servant to attend them. He should have ridden on horseback. It would have been so much faster, but Neville had insisted on tagging along.

Warwick had no idea why. The bloody man didn’t even like Wilhelmina. He was probably eager to watch the action unfold, as if it were a thrilling theatrical drama.

He’d been acquainted with Blanche Milton for over two decades, and he swore she wasn’t insane, that she wouldn’t have harmed Wilhelmina, but Warwick didn’t believe him.

Edna had been bribed to vanish with Charlie. After she was away from the property, how might Mrs. Milton have punished Wilhelmina? She was all alone in the world, with fickle, disloyal Edna Stewart as her only friend. Would she have noticed she was in danger?

Warwick couldn’t stop kicking himself. He never should have let her head home. He should have thrown her in his carriage and eloped with her to Scotland. He should have kept her safe, and he was sick at heart that he hadn’t bothered.

He dashed off, not tarrying as Neville climbed out at a much slower rate. Warwick had to be certain Wilhelmina was all right. Neville could do . . . *whatever* he liked.

A footman whipped the door open just as Warwick had reached for the knob.

“Hello, Mr. Stone,” the young man said. “Welcome back. Were we expecting

you?"

Warwick tossed a thumb in his father's direction. "That is my father, Neville Stone, Lord Swindon." The footman's eyes widened with awe. "He's exhaustingly arrogant and demands constant tending, so please deal with him for me. We traveled from London, and he'll be weary. Where is Mrs. Milton? I must speak to her at once."

"She's in her office. May I—"

"I don't need an escort."

Warwick marched off, winding down the halls to the rear of the house. He found Mrs. Milton seated at her desk.

"Where is Wilhelmina?"

She'd been writing a letter and hadn't heard him approaching. At his abrupt query, she leapt with surprise and knocked over her ink jar. Ink oozed across the desk, and she lurched out of her chair so it didn't drip on her clothes.

"Warwick Stone? What the devil . . . ?"

"Where is Wilhelmina, and don't waste my time pretending you can't guess why I'm here."

"I have no information as to her whereabouts, and I can't imagine why you would be inquiring about her. In light of what I've learned about your affair with her, you have some gall to utter her name aloud."

She began blotting the spilled ink with pieces of paper. "Would you excuse me? I must summon a servant to clean up this mess."

She turned to pull the cord that would ring the servants' bell, but Warwick wouldn't play games with her. He stomped over and grabbed her wrist. "Edna Stewart and Charlie Dobbs are in London and living under my protection."

He couldn't predict how long he'd provide assistance to Edna. She was Wilhelmina's half-aunt, so Wilhelmina could decide her fate. For the moment, she and Charlie were stashed away at his father's town house.

Mrs. Milton was startled by his mentioning the pair, but her reaction was quickly masked. "I've been wondering about the irresponsible shrew. When Wilhelmina discovered Charlie had been kidnapped, she was beside herself with worry. Edna was always a bit off in the head. Please tell me the boy is fine."

"As if you'd care about his condition. And that *boy* is your grandson."

She tsked with feigned aggravation. "How on earth have you developed such a ridiculous notion? Wilhelmina is his mother, and she's refused to identify his father. I can't fathom how you put me in the middle of that sordid scenario."

Footsteps echoed behind them, and Warwick recognized Neville's tread. Mrs. Milton frowned though, as if she was terrified over who might have accompanied him. A magistrate perhaps?

The footman who'd greeted him at the door peered in and said, "Mrs. Milton, Lord Swindon has arrived, and he insisted I bring him to you immediately. He wouldn't wait in the front parlor."

Neville waltzed in, radiating his usual debonair charm. He was always the handsomest, best-dressed man in any room he entered.

Mrs. Milton's frown deepened. "Neville? I'm stunned you would travel all this way."

"Blanche, darling, Edna Stewart shared such an awful story that I had to confer with you myself. I don't suppose you realize it, but Wilhelmina holds a special place in my affection, and I simply had to check on her."

At the comment, Warwick whipped around, convinced a stranger must have snuck in with Neville. He had a special *affection* for Wilhelmina? The man was deranged and always had been.

"Is Wilhelmina out in her cottage?" Warwick asked Mrs. Milton.

"I don't track her location, so I have no idea if she's at home or not."

The footman swallowed down a strangled sound, but didn't pipe up. Warwick glared at him and said, "Have you a remark to offer that might be pertinent?"

Mrs. Milton glared at him too, and he stammered, "Ah . . . ah . . . no, sir. I'm just a servant, and I have nothing to add."

Warwick swept out, calling over his shoulder to Neville, "Wilhelmina lives in the cottage on the other side of the garden. I'll see if she's there; I'll return shortly."

Mrs. Milton bestirred herself to say, "I forbid it. You have behaved despicably toward her. Leave her alone."

Warwick ignored her and told his father, "I'll be right back."

He hurried out a rear door, and he was practically running, being overwhelmed by the worst sense of dread. With each mile they'd journeyed from London, it had been growing, and now, it was a raging inferno.

He passed her studio first, and he staggered to a halt. The windows had been smashed out, and he went over and peeked through the broken glass. The benches and cabinets were there, but her canvases, easels, and supplies had been removed.

All of her lovely paintings were gone. All of them!

In the surrounding area, there were several ash circles in the grass where it was

clear some large bonfires had burned. He walked over to the nearest one and examined the residue, finding chunks of frames and canvases that hadn't been completely charred.

He heard voices across the garden. Neville was approaching with Mrs. Milton on his arm. She was trying to pull away, but Neville—for all his slothful habits—had an ironclad personality. When he was determined about an issue, he could be very resolute. He wouldn't release her.

"You witch!" Warwick shouted at her. "You burned her paintings! What is wrong with you?"

"I can't imagine what you mean," she claimed, but her cheeks heated, and she couldn't hold Warwick's gaze.

Warwick stared at his father and said, "Wilhelmina had a studio full of paintings. They've vanished."

Neville glowered at Mrs. Milton and asked, "Did you destroy them, Blanche? Tell me the truth. I won't stop badgering you until you admit it."

Mrs. Milton hemmed and hawed, then surprised him by confessing her crime. "Yes, I destroyed them! The petty harlot deserved it too!"

Neville clucked his tongue as if she were a disobedient child. "For shame, Blanche. I'm so disappointed to discover you can be cruel."

Warwick's alarm was rising. "Is Wilhelmina still alive? Have you killed her, you unhinged harpy?"

"If I had," Mrs. Milton said, "she'd have deserved that too. My daughter will never marry because of her!"

"You're a fool, Blanche Milton," Warwick said. "Wilhelmina didn't spread the rumors about Cassandra. It was Holden Drake. He saw Cassandra—quite by accident—when she was in Scotland with Wilhelmina and Edna. He told Rowena Smithwaite."

"You wouldn't wed Cassandra because of Wilhelmina," Mrs. Milton seethed. "Should I be happy about it? Should I impose no penalty?"

Warwick looked at Neville and said, "The *rumor* about Cassandra that had you so curious—"

Mrs. Milton shrieked. "Be silent!"

Despite her wailing, Warwick continued. "Cassandra was seduced by Jefferson Dobbs. Mrs. Milton owns a property in Scotland, and she sent Cassandra there to conceal her condition and birth the baby—who was Charlie Dobbs. Wilhelmina and

Edna went with her, and when they returned, Mrs. Milton was planning to put Charlie in an orphanage. Wilhelmina begged her not to.”

“I never considered that!” Mrs. Milton fumed to Neville, as Warwick kept on.

“They reached an agreement where Wilhelmina would claim Charlie was hers, rather than Cassandra’s. In exchange, Mrs. Milton would support them. Wilhelmina was branded a harlot, and Cassandra carried on as if nothing had happened.”

Neville scowled ferociously. “Blanche, your daughter was ruined by that lunatic, Jefferson Dobbs? Of all men! Yet you contacted me about Warwick. I thought we were friends.”

“We are friends,” she insisted, “and your son is a bald-faced liar!”

Neville’s expression was stony. “My son has many faults. He philanders, gambles, and carouses with his rowdy acquaintances, but he’s not a liar.”

Warwick added, “And I have never breathed a word about your stupid scandal to anyone. Neither has Wilhelmina. If you want to blame someone, track down Rowena Smithwaite and Lord Drake. Or how about this: Blame your daughter for getting herself into trouble in the first place! Or maybe blame yourself for not raising her better!”

Warwick whirled away from them and rushed to the cottage. It looked empty and shuttered, but smoke curled from a chimney. He tried the knob, and the door was locked, so he kicked it in.

Like a berserker bent on destruction, he burst into the parlor. He hadn’t been sure what he’d expected to find. He’d pictured Wilhelmina a prisoner, that she might have been chained to the sofa, but the house had an air of neglect, as if it had been abandoned for years.

He held himself very still, listening, and people were talking softly up on the second floor. It had to be her, a captive princess in a tower.

He raced to the stairs and climbed, resolved to rescue her and take her home. This time, if she argued, he’d simply toss her over his shoulder and haul her off.



ROBERT BOSWELL STARED AT Cassandra, his dearest beloved. They were hiding in Miss Dobbs’ cottage, in a bedchamber, and sequestered from the outside world.

He wasn’t certain what had happened to Miss Dobbs, but her departure had

completely altered Robert's situation. With it vacant, he was able to use it to lure Cassandra away from the manor. Her mother's parties had ceased, so she was bored and eager to be entertained. They were growing more attached, and there was no doubt he was making progress at winning her.

They'd been tucked away for two hours, which was risky, and Cassandra would have to leave soon. A regular ruse had been established whereby, every afternoon, she took a brisk walk. No one paid any attention to her, so she'd march down the lane until she was out of sight of the main house, then she'd sneak through the woods and enter the cottage by the rear door.

She assumed they were being incredibly sly, that they would never be discovered, but Robert desperately hoped they were found out. Her maid accompanied her, and she was a sullen girl who was rankled by their subterfuge and figured she would eventually be liable for Cassandra's misbehavior.

He always slipped her a few pennies to guarantee her silence, but he couldn't afford it. He suspected, once the money stopped flowing, she'd tattle about Cassandra's antics, and he was excited for that moment to arrive. He'd spent months, begging permission to court Cassandra, but her mother had thwarted his honorable attempts. If he had to utilize some trickery to receive what he craved, he wouldn't feel guilty.

She was extremely foxed, slurring her words and her balance shaky. He doled out the amounts of liquor and medicinal tonic she imbibed, but she always demanded more than he offered. He could never let her become too inebriated. Mrs. Milton might notice her reduced condition, and it would prevent subsequent assignations.

"I have to go," she said.

"There's no hurry."

"You always coax me into staying longer than I should."

"That's because, when I see you, it's the highlight of my day."

"I'm leading you on when I shouldn't. I allow your furtive visits, but I should put my foot down."

He flashed a cajoling smile. "Yes, but if I didn't come back, you wouldn't have access to my mother's elixir. Wouldn't you hate that?"

"If you were a gentleman, you'd tell me where she purchases it. I could buy my own."

"Then I wouldn't have any reason to call on you."

"If Mother learned you were here, she'd be so angry."

"I don't care about your mother, and I truly don't know why you care either."

“She’s my *mother*.”

“Yes, poor you.”

Cassandra had been pacing, and she spun too quickly. She staggered, and he leapt over to catch her. Their bodies were pressed together in a thrilling way, and desire rocked him. Why was he denying himself? It wasn’t healthy for a man to tamp down so much lust. Everyone said so.

He would have kissed her on the mouth, but she yanked away, so he only grazed her cheek.

“We’re not kissing!” she scolded. “We’re not . . . anything. I was swept away by passion once, and I shan’t ever suffer it again.”

“What are you talking about? What passion? When were you swept anywhere?”

She didn’t clarify her odd comment, saying instead, “Ooh, I’m so dizzy. I need to sit down before I fall down.”

She collapsed slightly, and as her eyes fluttered shut, her weight was very heavy. There was a chair in the room, but the bed was much nearer. He dragged her to it and wrestled her onto the mattress.

He straightened her legs and crossed her arms over her chest, and she could have been Sleeping Beauty, as if she’d been bewitched by a fairy’s spell. Was he Prince Charming? Could he wipe away the enchantment?

He debated whether to wake her or whether to let her doze. How long did they dare to tarry?

Suddenly, there was a violent crash down in the lower part of the house. Had the door been kicked in? Booted strides were audible, with much stomping around, then a man barked, “Where is Miss Dobbs?”

Cassandra’s maid had been shivering in the kitchen, waiting for her mistress to be finished, and she replied, “Miss Dobbs has moved away.”

“A likely story!”

The man started up the stairs, and the maid tried her best to waylay him.

“Sir, sir! You oughtn’t to go up there! I swear to you! Miss Dobbs has moved!”

“I can hear her speaking. Is she a prisoner? Is that it?”

Apparently, the foolish girl could devise no other method to curtail his ascent, and she frantically called, “Miss Milton! Miss Milton! You have company!”

Robert was never one to squander an opportunity. He climbed onto the bed and hovered next to Cassandra. She wasn’t conscious, and he grabbed the fabric of her

gown and ripped away a few buttons so it was loosened. He tugged down the bodice to expose her corset, then he tugged up her skirt so they would appear to be in the middle of a debauched tryst.

He allowed himself a lecherous peek at her stockings and garters, then he stretched out beside her, an arm draped over her waist. He pretended to nuzzle her neck, but in fact, he was braced for the pending encounter.

The door banged open so forcefully that it flew around and crashed into the wall. The man loomed in, and Robert couldn't have guessed who it would be, but he was stunned to see Warwick Stone. Why would he have strutted in?

Robert came up on an elbow, seeming casual, as he said, "For pity's sake, we're busy. Must you interrupt?"

Mr. Stone was enraged, like a mad Viking, and he slid to a halt. He leaned in and studied Cassandra, then he lurched away.

"Boswell?" he gasped. "You and Miss Milton! What are you thinking?"

"We're quite in love and have been for ages. Her mother is vehemently opposed to our amour, so we must meet privately."

"I certainly hope you love her, for I fear a wedding is about to transpire in your immediate future."

Robert chuckled, as if he was an experienced roué. "We're both gentlemen, aren't we? Can't this remain our little secret? Or will duty spur you to talk to Mrs. Milton about what you've witnessed? If you must tell her, I understand."

Cassandra was roused by their voices, and she gazed at the ceiling. She was befuddled and couldn't figure out where she was. Then recognition dawned.

"Robert!" she snapped. "Are you insane? What have you done? Release me at once!"

She struggled to scoot away, but he tightened his grip on her waist, pinning her to him.

"You needn't fret, dearest," he said. "It's only Mr. Stone, and he'll be very discreet." He glanced at Mr. Stone. "But then, I realize your honor is at stake, sir. You'll probably feel compelled to tattle to her mother."

"I'm afraid your fate is out of my hands," Mr. Stone said.

The remark confused Robert. Mr. Stone had to alert Mrs. Milton! Robert couldn't bear to discover he wouldn't.

More footsteps sounded, and an older fellow entered the room. He was definitely rich and important, and he said to Mr. Stone, "What have we here?"

“To my great regret, I’ve stumbled on a very inappropriate dalliance.”

“It’s not a dalliance,” Robert huffed. “It’s true love. Cassandra is a goddess, and I shall cherish her forever.”

Mr. Stone snorted with disdain. “Well, I suppose you’ll cherish her until you’ve spent a solid week or two in her company. We’ll check on your opinion then.”

The older man shifted away, and his expression became commiserating as he said to someone out in the hall, “I’d like to keep this from you, but I don’t imagine I can or should.”

To Robert’s enormous delight, Blanche Milton blustered in. She looked at Cassandra where she was arranged on the bed, with her gown open and her skirt rucked up. She looked at Robert, comfortably snuggled with her. He grinned, preening like the cat that had got in the cream.

“Sorry, Mrs. Milton,” he said, “but Cassandra and I have finally been caught.”

“You . . . you . . . up-jumped fiend!” Mrs. Milton bellowed.

She clasped her head with both palms, as if it was aching painfully, and she shrieked out a sort of feral animal wail, one Robert had never heard emerge from a human’s throat. Then she collapsed to the floor in a dead faint.

Chapter Twenty-Three



“I HAVE ANOTHER LETTER for you.”

Wilhelmina sanded the ink and attached a dab of wax, then she handed it to Mrs. Page. The older servant was the taciturn, grouchy caretaker at Blanche’s cottage in Scotland.

“I’m walking to the village tomorrow,” Mrs. Page said. “I’ll post it then.”

“Thank you.”

Mrs. Page exited the room, and Wilhelmina sat, listening to the silence until it seemed to smother her. She was in the front parlor, gazing out the window. There was nothing to see, no neighbors strolling by. She was at the end of a rural lane and so far from civilization that she might have fallen off the edge of the Earth.

It was blustery outside, angry clouds hinting that it might snow. There was a fire burning in the hearth, but it didn’t warm the temperature. She had a wool blanket over her shoulders, and she pulled it tighter, struggling and failing to trap more of her body’s heat.

She’d arrived at the property with no bad weather to delay her. The trip had been fast and unpleasant, with her two male escorts—snooty idiots who’d claimed their names were Mr. Brown and Mr. Black—not inclined to make it more comfortable.

She’d forgotten how slow the world moved at the cottage. There were no chores to do, no one to talk to, and the few occasions she’d tried to chat with Mrs. Page, the woman had been clear that they wouldn’t be cordial. She was quickly going mad, and it meant she had too much time to fret and panic.

Once she’d shaken off the shock of her encounter with Blanche, she’d realized she needed some help. She wasn’t necessarily opposed to locking herself away while she ascertained whether she was increasing or not. Blanche had been correct that

she couldn't have dawdled at Hill Haven while she sorted it out. She'd been wise to leave, but stupid to let Blanche pick the destination.

After she'd calmed down, she'd persuaded herself to contact Warwick. Despite Blanche's hurtful stories, he had to be informed that there might be a baby. He wasn't a cruel man. Even if he'd married Mrs. Smithwaite, he'd assist her.

She'd been in Scotland for two weeks, and she'd written to him every day. The mail was so unreliable, and with her stuck in the middle of nowhere, she was worried about her missives being delivered. If she continued sending them, she was convinced one of them would reach him safe and sound.

After she'd more thoroughly pondered her situation, she'd remembered that she didn't trust Blanche. Would Blanche ever reveal where Charlie and Edna were hiding? Probably not, so Warwick could aid her in finding them, and if Blanche had been horrid to them, Warwick would hold Blanche accountable.

She was bored, freezing, and miserable, and her belly was churning, so she was nauseous, which was exasperating. She'd become a certifiable hypochondriac. At the least little twinge, she would quail with alarm, positive she was suffering a symptom of pregnancy.

She decided to ask Mrs. Page if she had a medicinal tea that might soothe an upset stomach, and she went to the kitchen at the rear of the house. The grumpy woman loafed there, cooking and gossiping with Mr. Brown and Mr. Black who had transported Wilhelmina.

They hadn't left, but were sleeping over the barn. They insisted they would convey her to Edna after Wilhelmina's sojourn had ended. She kept telling herself that was true, but she couldn't shake the feeling that they were guards whom Blanche had paid to watch her. But *watch her* from what?

In such an isolated spot, what antic did Blanche imagine Wilhelmina might attempt?

The kitchen door was closed, and as she proceeded toward it, she could hear Mrs. Page conversing with the two men.

"The bloody girl assumes I'll mail these for her," Mrs. Page was saying.

"Are they all to that Stone fellow?" one of the men inquired.

"Every sodding one," Mrs. Page crudely replied. "She's been begging him to rescue her, as if she's a fairy princess caught in a tower."

"Well, she's caught all right."

They snickered, and Mrs. Page said, "She thinks the toplofty oaf will come for

her.”

“Isn’t she an optimist?”

Wilhelmina was stunned. From the moment she’d penned the first letter, she’d simply given them to Mrs. Page, and the shrew had agreed to mail them. It hadn’t occurred to Wilhelmina that they might not have been sent. She’d naïvely envisioned them winging their way to England, that he might already have been apprised of her plight. She’d pictured him dropping everything and racing to tarry by her side as they waited to learn if there would be consequences.

But Mrs. Page had read them? Then she hadn’t posted them? They were still sitting in her kitchen?

Wilhelmina stormed in just as Mrs. Page threw her stack of letters onto the fire in the hearth. A huge blaze was roaring, and they vanished in the flames before Wilhelmina could move a muscle.

At Wilhelmina’s loud arrival, Mrs. Page jumped and whirled around. The two men were lounged on chairs, their feet stretched out, arms casually crossed over their chests. They studied her with cold eyes, as if she were a lunatic who might need to be subdued.

“What have you done?” she demanded of Mrs. Page.

“You’re not allowed to correspond,” Mrs. Page said. “Those are my orders from Mrs. Milton.”

“Mrs. Milton has no authority over me, and you are not my nanny. You’re a servant, and my personal business is none of your affair.”

Mrs. Page smirked and glanced at the men, as if they knew a secret Wilhelmina didn’t.

“If you didn’t want to carry them into the village,” Wilhelmina said, “you could have admitted it. I’ll take them myself from now on. I’m suffocating in this dank house anyway. A daily walk will be good for me.”

“You can’t gad about. It’s prohibited too.”

Wilhelmina huffed with offense. “I’m not your prisoner, and you will not boss me.”

Mr. Black stood and said, “You may not be *her* prisoner, but you’re mine. You’re not walking to the village—or anywhere else for that matter.”

“You’re insane,” Wilhelmina firmly stated. “Don’t you dare boss me either.”

He gaped at her as if she were an idiot, as if she didn’t understand what was transpiring. He nodded to Mr. Brown and said, “We should start locking her in.”

Wilhelmina was aghast. "You'll what?"

"Fix the door to her bedroom," Mr. Black told his companion. "We'll keep her up there until it's time for her to sail. With just the two of us on duty, we can't watch her constantly, so we have to be more meticulous about restraining her."

"What are you talking about?" Wilhelmina asked.

"Didn't Mrs. Milton explain? You're not returning to England."

"I most certainly am. I'm simply staying for . . . well . . . for a few weeks. Then I'm going home."

He merely shrugged. "No, you're leaving. Mrs. Milton can't have you lurking where you could tell tales."

"I have no idea what you mean," she lied.

"I'll just bet you don't. Mrs. Milton doesn't trust you, so she's paid the fees and signed the documents."

"Fees and documents for what?"

"You've been sold into indenture. You're sailing to Massachusetts, and you'll depart on Friday. It's all arranged, and it's not up to you."

A wave of fury surged through her, but even more riveting was the frisson of fear that slithered down her spine. Could Blanche sell Wilhelmina into indenture? Could she bind Wilhelmina without her permission? Was that possible? Was it legal?

Mr. Black seemed to suppose it was, but she figured he was a criminal. Legal technicalities wouldn't be an issue for him.

She spun to march out. She had to flee and get to the village where, hopefully, she could ask for some help. First though, she had to bundle up against the weather before she began the lengthy trek down the country lane.

Would they stop her? Wilhelmina had clearly informed them she wasn't a prisoner, but they presumed she was. The entire debacle was too bizarre to believe.

She hadn't taken three steps, when Mr. Black rushed up and grabbed her.

"You'll wait here," he said, "until your door is secured."

"Are you deranged?"

"No. Just well compensated."

His grip tight, he dragged her to a chair and forced her down onto it. He loomed over her, definitely a guard now, as Mr. Brown scurried off to work on her door so, evidently, it could become her jail cell.

"Warwick Stone will come for me," she boasted. "He'll find out how you've treated me, and you'll be sorry."

The cretin scoffed and pointed to the hearth where her letters had burned to ash. “Mr. Stone will never know what happened to you. In fact, no one will ever know. That’s what Mrs. Milton hired me to accomplish and that’s the conclusion I intend to supply.”



“I WON’T DO IT.”

“It’s not up to you, Miss Milton.”

“You’re not my father,” Cassandra said to Lord Swindon. “You can’t make decisions for me, and you certainly can’t order me about.”

Lord Swindon glared at her. “May I call you Cassandra?”

“No. I demand to speak with my mother. She would never allow this.”

“I think we can both agree that your mother is indisposed. Perhaps permanently.”

Cassandra’s head was pounding, her stomach roiling with nausea. It required every ounce of effort she possessed not to vomit all over the floor.

They were back in the manor, in the front parlor, and she had a hazy recollection of how she’d gotten there. Earlier, she’d reveled at the cottage with Robert, and she might have had a bit too much to drink. Had she fallen asleep? She must have dozed off, for she’d awakened on the bed, and Lord Swindon and Warwick Stone had been standing over her.

Blanche and a few servants had followed them in. Robert had been lying next to her, and her clothes had been askew. Had she and Robert . . . ?

She tried to remember. After her disaster with Jefferson, she’d sworn she would never engage in carnal relations again, so it was madness to suppose she’d have lowered her standards for Robert Boswell. She couldn’t abide him, and if a risqué incident had occurred, she hadn’t been a willing partner.

Lord Swindon had taken charge of the situation. He was spewing commands to the staff as if the property was his, but then, it wasn’t as if Blanche could step in and seize control. When she’d seen Cassandra with Robert, she’d collapsed in a stunned heap, and she hadn’t yet roused from her stupor.

The footmen had devised a pallet, and they’d placed her on it and had carried her to the manor. She was up in her bedchamber, appearing paralyzed and senseless,

and the doctor had been summoned. The housekeeper had baldly stated her opinion that Blanche had suffered an apoplexy, and who could argue with her?

The servants were openly sneering at Cassandra, accusing her of causing Blanche's breakdown by being so reckless. They were brazenly glowering, being condemning and reproachful.

Only Robert looked delighted. He was lurking in the corner, grinning and obviously pleased.

"We have moved far beyond what you want and don't want," Lord Swindon was saying. "You have publicly ruined yourself, Cassandra. Your mother isn't healthy enough to deal with this scandal, but I am an old friend, so I shall deal with it for her."

"If you plan to marry me to Robert Boswell, you're insane."

"There's no other option for you. You have disgraced yourself in the most shameful way possible, and there are witnesses."

"Name one!" Cassandra snottily retorted.

"I saw you—and Warwick saw you too. So did your maid and two of the footmen. You are completely destroyed, and there can be no saving you, except by a quick wedding."

Robert blustered forward. "I'm happy to proceed, Lord Swindon. I've always loved her, and I take full responsibility for my actions."

"As well you should," the pompous aristocrat said. "Are your parents nearby, Mr. Boswell? Can you send for your father?"

"Yes, I'll have a footman fetch him. He'll attend you at once."

"I will have a messenger ride to London to obtain a Special License. The ceremony will be tomorrow morning at eleven."

"I am not marrying Robert Boswell!" she said. "I am to have a toplofty husband who will give me a grand life in town. Mother is arranging it."

There were numerous rude snickers to her comment, and she seemed to be on a runaway carriage that was traveling too fast.

Lord Swindon clucked his tongue like a fussy nanny. "Your reputation has already been shredded by the rumors swirling in London. You can't survive this calamity. Marriage to Mr. Boswell is your only choice."

Robert scowled. "What rumors are swirling in London?"

"Haven't you heard, Mr. Boswell?" Lord Swindon said. "Cassandra has been a fallen woman for many years."

"No, not my Cassandra," Robert protested. "She's my goddess! She would

never have humiliated herself.”

“I’m sorry to break the news to you then,” Lord Swindon replied. “Her mother kept it a secret, so I’m not surprised that you haven’t been informed.”

“What are you talking about?” Robert said.

Lord Swindon explained, “Cassandra birthed a child out of wedlock when she was sixteen or so. She hid it well, but recently, the story has circulated like wildfire.”

“She’s had no child!” Robert insisted.

“Her bastard son is Charlie Dobbs. Have you met him? He’s the little blond boy being raised by Wilhelmina Dobbs. *She* has pretended to be his mother, so Cassandra could conceal her folly.”

“That can’t be,” Robert murmured, his dismay profound. “It just can’t be!”

Lord Swindon wouldn’t shut up. “In light of Cassandra’s sordid history, her tryst with you is the exact sort of conduct we should have expected from her.”

Robert whipped around to Cassandra. “Cassandra, is this true? Tell me Lord Swindon is confused. Swear to me!”

“Of course he’s confused,” Cassandra firmly stated, but she couldn’t hold his gaze.

“If she’s ruined, I don’t want her!” Robert declared.

“It’s not up to you either,” Lord Swindon said. “You’ve both made your bed, and now, you’ll lie in it forever.”

Robert stared at Cassandra, his expression accusatory, as if he’d been tricked. As if any of it could be her fault! She’d been sleeping when the crowd had barged in. How could she be blamed for that?

He might have castigated her, but Lord Swindon prevented any outburst. “Write the note to your father, Mr. Boswell. Have a footman convey it to him immediately. I should like to confer with him about the wedding before the hour is out.”

Robert was too intimidated to argue with the posh nobleman. He stomped off to find a writing desk, and Cassandra was left to face Lord Swindon on her own.

Mr. Stone had been over by the hearth, gaping at her as if she were an insect he’d like to squash under his boot. Suddenly, he advanced on her and said, “Where is Wilhelmina?”

Of all the topics plaguing Cassandra, Wilhelmina was at the very bottom of the list. “She never liked me. Why would she have apprised me as to her location?”

“Your mother evicted her. Don’t waste my time by claiming you are unaware

of her whereabouts.”

“I’m busy, Mr. Stone,” she said. “Your father is harassing me, and my mother has collapsed. Could you please annoy somebody else?”

There were servants hovering, watching all. A footman pushed forward and said, “I know where they sent her, Mr. Stone. I heard them plotting.”

Cassandra glared at the footman, her wrath oozing out. “I don’t give you permission to speak with Mr. Stone. If you try, you’ll be fired.”

“I would never stay and work for you and Mr. Boswell, so you don’t need to fire me. I shall impart the details to Mr. Stone, then I quit.” He turned to Mr. Stone and clicked his heels. “If you’ll come with me, sir, I can provide the information you seek, but let’s do it in a different room. I’d rather not dawdle in Miss Milton’s presence another second.”

“Well! I never . . . !” Cassandra huffed as the dolt and Mr. Stone marched out.

Once it was quiet, Lord Swindon smirked. “It appears you have no friends and your servants don’t like you.”

“You’re wrong. They’re devoted to me.”

“Why don’t you head to your bedchamber and have a nap. And for pity’s sake, sober up! When we next meet, I’d like to hope you’re in a better condition. I would hate to have you so drunk at your wedding tomorrow that you can’t stand on your own two feet.”

“I am not intoxicated!”

“Aren’t you?”

His disdain washed over her like a black cloud. He was much taller than she was, and with her looking up at him, she felt terribly dizzy. Her stomach roiled, and nausea gurgled in her belly.

She staggered away from him, lurched over to the nearest potted fern, and vomited into the vase. No one walked over to help her. No one asked if she was all right.

She straightened and spun around. Everyone glowered at her as if she was the most loathsome person in the world.



BLANCHE WAS ON HER bed and frowning up at the ceiling. She was incredibly confused

and couldn't figure out what had happened. She couldn't move, and she kept telling herself to get up, but her limbs wouldn't obey. She yearned to call out, to request assistance, but she couldn't form any words.

She started wailing, but the noise she emitted sounded like a grunt. A housemaid leaned over and dabbed away some spittle that had dripped from her mouth.

"Don't worry, Mrs. Milton," she said. "The doctor is on his way. I'm sure he'll have you mended in no time."

The woman's troubled expression belied her remark, and Blanche was sufficiently cogent in her mental processes to realize a dreadful event had occurred. There would be no *mending* anything.

The door opened, and Blanche would have glanced over to see who had entered, but she couldn't turn her head. The maid chatted with someone, then said, "Thank you for offering. I'll be back shortly."

The maid's footsteps retreated down the hall, then her visitor approached the bed. Robert Boswell loomed into view, and she recoiled with alarm.

"You old witch," he whispered. "You deceived me."

I have no idea what you mean, Blanche replied in her mind.

"I thought you should know that I'm being forced to shackle myself to your daughter who, I'm told, is a soiled dove."

No! No! I refuse to let you!

"It seems a perfect ending, doesn't it? You claimed I wasn't good enough for her, but I wouldn't give up. I staged her ruination, so I'd be required to wed her—you wouldn't be able to stop me—then I discover she's already ruined."

That's not true. She's pristine as the day she was born!

"My father and Lord Swindon are arranging a quick marriage, so Cassandra is about to be mine. But I don't want her!"

I don't want you to have her!

"Hill Haven will be mine. Cassandra will be mine. And *you* will be mine. Your care and comfort are about to become my responsibility. How proficiently do you imagine I will shoulder that task?" He pretended to ponder, then said, "I never liked you, so it's highly likely I won't exert very much effort at all."

I will not be at your mercy!

He chuckled quite evilly. "Your eyes are shifting about, so there must be some cerebral activity going on inside that convoluted brain of yours. I'm anxious for you to

loaf here and contemplate me every minute. Think of me lording myself over Cassandra and over your beloved estate.”

I don't agree to any of this!

“In fact, you should fear me, don't you suppose?” He picked up a pillow and, for a brief second, he pressed it over her face, cutting off her air. Then, abruptly, he pulled it away. He whispered even more ominously, “Don't forget: You'll often be alone, and there are many, many pillows in these rooms.”

The housemaid bustled in, and he casually stepped away.

“How is she?” the woman murmured.

“She's a tad distressed,” Mr. Boswell said, “but in light of her condition, I guess that's only to be expected.”

They talked quietly, then he left. The maid puttered around, fluffing blankets and generally being annoying.

Blanche stared hard, looking, looking, looking, struggling to impart a message that Mr. Boswell was a lunatic, that he should be kicked out of the manor, but the woman didn't peek down, so she didn't notice Blanche's frantic warning.



WARWICK REINED IN HIS horse and sat quietly, studying the cottage at the end of the lane. His brother, Hunter, was with him. When there was trouble brewing, Warwick wanted one of his brothers guarding his back, so he'd ripped Hunter away from his bride and had forced him to race to Scotland.

His fingers were crossed that they were at the right spot, that Wilhelmina was present. If she wasn't, he couldn't fathom what his next move would be. The footman at Hill Haven was convinced Blanche had a nefarious scheme working with regard to Wilhelmina, but with the horrid woman suffering her apoplexy, no explanation could be forced out of her.

Cassandra had pretended she had no information, and Warwick hadn't had time to fuss with her and pry it out. If he discovered Wilhelmina had been harmed, he couldn't predict how he might lash out at Cassandra, although with her marrying that cretin, Robert Boswell, perhaps she was being punished enough.

“Are you sure this is the place?” Hunter asked.

“It should be— *if* Mrs. Milton still owns it. If she sold it and bought another

cottage, then I can't imagine what we'll do."

"In the village, they claimed it belongs to her."

"I suppose they would know," Warwick said, "but then, they're Scots. They might have simply been pulling our leg merely to annoy us."

The house was definitely occupied. Smoke curled from the chimneys, and there was a carriage parked outside, the horses hitched to it as if someone was visiting or was about to leave. Warwick wished he could peer through the walls, so he'd have some idea of what was occurring in the residence.

He stared at Hunter and said, "The men who transported her appeared to be ruffians. What could their intent have been?"

It was a debate they'd had during their lengthy ride north, and Hunter snorted with exasperation. "I can't guess, but if they've injured Miss Dobbs, can you promise you won't kill anybody?"

"I can't promise that."

"I really don't care to witness a homicide. We already murdered one fiend this year. We shouldn't make it a habit."

Hunter's wife, Hannah, had been harassed for ages by her stepfather. Ultimately, he'd attempted to slay her in a failed plot to steal her property from her. He'd nearly succeeded too. How was a man like Warwick expected to act when faced with a grim circumstance like that?

With very little thought or remorse, he and Hunter had dispatched the brute to the Great Beyond. The kingdom was better off without him, and they weren't sorry.

"If villains don't want me killing them," Warwick sarcastically retorted, "they should behave themselves."

They were both army veterans, so they'd seen their share of death. They also possessed a skewed view of the world and the sort of justice that should be dispensed to evil wrongdoers. They never worried about rules or laws. They simply levied an appropriate penalty, and consequences were a fluid, vague concept.

Hopefully, in this situation, there would be no problems. Hopefully, Wilhelmina would be safe and hale, and he'd whisk her to England without any difficulty.

If it didn't resolve that way though, he had a pistol and knife in his coat and another knife in his boot. He had a thick wooden club attached to his saddle, and a hard swing with it could lay low any idiot who was determined to be stupid. He'd been persuading himself that he wouldn't have to use any of his weapons.

“What is your plan?” Hunter asked.

“I’d like to kick in the door, but I’m not certain we’re at the correct location. I should probably knock and introduce myself.”

“And if you’re met with recalcitrance or menace?”

“Then I have this.”

He yanked out the wooden club and wagged it at Hunter, then they dismounted and tied their horses to the fence. They walked to the door, and Warwick knocked briskly. Initially, there was no answer, and he tried over and over before someone approached.

An older woman with a dour expression peeked out. “May I help you?”

“I am Mr. Warwick Stone.” She flinched with a bit of alarm, but she didn’t respond, so he continued. “This is my brother, Lord Marston. We’ve traveled from London to call on Wilhelmina Dobbs. Is she available to receive us?”

“There’s no one here by that name.”

She started to push the door closed, but Warwick was too quick for her. He wedged in his foot and said, “No offense, ma’am, but I don’t believe you, and I’d like to check for myself.”

He shoved by her and blustered into the vestibule. There was a portmanteau on the floor, and he wasn’t positive, but he thought it was Wilhelmina’s. Were they leaving with her? Where could they have been headed? Had he reached her just in the nick of time?

“Where is she?” he demanded of the sullen harpy.

“I can’t imagine who you mean.”

He turned to Hunter. “Keep an eye on her for me. I’m sure Wilhelmina is here. I’ll search the rooms.”

Suddenly, a female screamed, then there was a loud crash.

Hunter chuckled. “This sounds as if it might get interesting in a hurry.”

Warwick flew up the stairs, without waiting to learn if his brother followed.



“I’M NOT GOING ANYWHERE with you.”

“You don’t have a choice. The papers have been signed, so you’re good and truly bound.”

Wilhelmina glared at Mr. Black as if he was deranged and maybe he was.

"In what world can a woman be bound against her will?" she asked.

"Every woman is bound against her will. There are different kinds of shackles."

"Well, aren't you a philosopher?" she snidely said, and he smirked.

"I try my best to be brilliant. Have I impressed you?"

"Blanche Milton had no right to contract me."

"It doesn't matter. The captain who's taking you to America isn't fussy about legalities. He accepts money for services rendered, and there isn't much that moves him beyond that incentive."

They were in Wilhelmina's bedchamber at Blanche's Scottish cottage. For three exhausting days, she'd been a prisoner. Then he'd arrived to announce her departure, that she would be delivered to the ship that would transport her to Massachusetts. The entire scenario was so bizarre that it could have been a dream.

"Weren't you apprised of who I am?" she said. "I am Jefferson Dobbs' daughter. He was a famous painter, and I have rich friends. Whatever Blanche paid you, I can pay you more. Let me contact Warwick Stone. I'll show you."

"I haven't heard of Jefferson Dobbs, but I *have* heard of the Stone brothers. I wouldn't want to quarrel with any of them, so I'll have to pass."

"You should be afraid of Warwick and how he'll react when he discovers how you've treated me."

"How will he find out, Miss Dobbs? You're confused about what's happening. He'll never know where you went."

"Why would you be so loyal to Blanche Milton? She's such a miserable shrew. Why would you care if she's thwarted?"

"It's not her specifically. I carry out dirty tasks for all sorts of wealthy nobs, and my word is my bond. If I betrayed her, who would hire me in the future?"

Wilhelmina scoffed with disdain. "You consider yourself trustworthy?"

"Honor among thieves."

His dubious companion, Mr. Brown, poked his nose in. "We have to get going. Are you doing this or not?"

"I'm doing it. Give me a minute. She's been talking my ear off, but I'll shut her up pretty fast."

Mr. Brown slipped out, then Mr. Black nodded to the bed.

"Climb up, Miss Dobbs."

"What? No, I won't."

“Climb up on the bed,” he repeated more sternly, and to her dismay, he looked quite dangerous.

“What are you thinking?” she asked.

“You know what I’m thinking. I’m aware of why we’re here, so you’re no trembling virgin. I’ve had to watch you strut and flaunt yourself, and I’ve exercised incredible restraint. I deserve a reward for putting up with you.”

Realization settled in with a vengeance. “You’re planning to ravage me? Are you mad?”

“I’ll make it quick, and I won’t be too rough. I promise.”

He marched over and grabbed hold of her arm. Her sense of disorientation was astounding. She tried to jerk away, but he was built like an ox, and she couldn’t wrench free. She grappled and kicked at his shins, but despite how vehemently she wrestled, she couldn’t stop their forward progress.

Finally, he picked her up and tossed her on the mattress. She had a brief second where she nearly scooted away, but he hurled himself onto her, his body forcefully crashing into hers. She started brawling in earnest, scratching at him like a wildcat, while he pinned her down and fought to gain control.

She bucked and tussled to push him off, but she couldn’t manage it. She yearned to shout for help, but who would aid her? Mr. Brown? Mrs. Page? They were criminal fiends.

He clasped a palm over her mouth, but he was clawing at the front of her gown too, so he didn’t have enough limbs to accomplish his goal. For an instant, he was off balance, and she shoved with all her might and slid away. It provided her with a chance to reach for the lamp next to the bed.

She whacked him alongside the head with it, the glass shattering, the main section dropping to the floor with a heavy thud. Then she was screaming and screaming as if she could summon the whole world to assist her. She didn’t care if no one came. In the future, she would always remember how viciously she’d battled.

“You bitch,” he muttered. “I’ll kill you for that.”

There was a huge gash on his temple, and it was bleeding profusely. Droplets dripped into his eyes, and he swiped at them, struggling to see. She was still screaming, and he clamped his palm over her mouth again, but it was slick with blood, so he wasn’t having much luck in silencing her.

Vaguely, she noticed the door opening, and Mr. Brown called, “What the hell? Just tup her and be done with it. She’s bellowing so loudly that Satan, himself, might

hear her.”

Suddenly, she thought footsteps pounded up the stairs, but it might have simply been the frantic beating of her heart. But no. Someone had arrived, someone who was very angry.

“Dammit!” Mr. Brown mumbled out in the hall.

Fists were thrown, and there was a brutal thumping, then a male burst in and yelled, “Release her or you’re a dead man.”

Mr. Black was in a murderous rage himself, so he couldn’t figure out what was occurring. It took him a moment to halt and glance over. A man rushed at them, raised a club, and hit Mr. Black as hard as he could.

His cheekbone cracked, then he fell onto her like a boulder tumbling off a cliff. She was being smothered, the smell of his torso and clothes choking her.

“Get him off me!” she wailed. “Get him off!”

The man grabbed Mr. Black by his coat, then dragged him off the mattress and onto the floor. He landed with a resounding clunk and more bones cracked. His nose, she hoped, or maybe his skull.

She was befuddled and bewildered. It had all happened so fast. It had all ended so fast. It had been terrifying; it had been unbelievably sick and twisted.

Her champion, her savior, loomed up before her, and . . . ?

There was Warwick.

“Wilhelmina,” he said. “It’s me. It’s Warwick. Are you hurt?”

“No, no, I’m not hurt.”

She flung herself into his arms and began to weep, knowing she was safe.



“WHAT WERE THEY PLANNING?”

“Blanche Milton had forged documents that signed me into indenture in Massachusetts. They were taking me to a ship and had bribed the captain who isn’t too concerned about the legalities of his passengers.”

At Wilhelmina’s unemotional explanation, Warwick shuddered with dread. What if he and Hunter had shown up a few minutes later? What if they’d missed her?

They were in the front parlor of the cottage. Hunter had stoked a huge fire to warm the room. Wilhelmina was seated on the sofa, while Warwick paced. He was

barking out furious questions, as if he was interrogating a prisoner. He didn't mean to be so sharp with her, but he was just so irate.

She had scratches on her face, a bruise on her neck, but other than those marks, she appeared to be unharmed. She was shaking though and struggling to hide her distress.

Her clothes had been torn in the melee, and she'd had blood splattered all over from when she'd clawed at her attacker. Warwick had helped her to wash and change, so for the most part, she'd been repaired to an acceptable condition. She seemed fine, or if not fine, she was concealing it well, but *he* was a complete and utter mess.

The three criminals were in the kitchen, bound, gagged, and waiting to learn their fate. He'd thoroughly pummeled the men, Wilhelmina's assailant especially, and when Warwick had last checked on him, he was still unconscious. Perhaps he'd never awoken. That way, Warwick wouldn't have to level a penalty of his own.

"Hunter," Warwick said to his brother, "would you take Wilhelmina into the village for me? Rent rooms for the night at the coaching inn. I'll join you in a bit, and we'll travel to London together. I'll hire a carriage."

"Whatever you're intending," Hunter replied, "I should assist you." At the same moment, Wilhelmina said, "Don't you dare leave me alone!"

She reached out and clasped his hand, and her grip was so tight that she crushed the bones of his fingers. He didn't pull away though, but let her mangle the appendage. He was happy to supply any relief that made her feel better.

Her trembling had grown even more noticeable. She was in shock; he understood that she was. In the army, he'd seen the same reaction on plenty of desperate occasions when soldiers had been frightened out of their wits. Her anxiety would ebb, but not for a very long time. If she'd been sufficiently terrorized, it might never totally vanish.

He spoke to Hunter. "I have to tarry to wrap up a few things, but I'd like to get Wilhelmina out of this despicable spot. Once she's away, she'll calm down quicker."

He flashed a visual message that Hunter recognized. Warwick had to impose some consequences, and Wilhelmina shouldn't be around to witness them.

"Are you sure you don't need me?" Hunter asked.

"No. I can deal with it on my own."

Hunter pushed away from the wall and said to Wilhelmina, "Would you come with me, Miss Dobbs? Warwick is correct that you should depart this awful

place.”

“I’m not going anywhere without Warwick,” she firmly stated, which Warwick probably could have predicted. She was the most stubborn woman he’d ever met.

He knelt down. “Wilhelmina, I have to carry out some difficult tasks, and you shouldn’t observe them. They’ll only upset you further.”

“I’m not upset. I’m very, very angry. Allow me to remain and vent some of it.”

Warwick peeked over at Hunter, and his brother shrugged, telling Warwick the decision was his.

“All right, you can stay,” he murmured to her, and he was already kicking himself for being a fool.

When had he ever been able to deny her any request? And maybe this was for the best. If she realized her attacker could never hurt her again, that he wasn’t out there, roaming free and inflicting more misery, she might heal faster.

He rose and extended a hand to her. “Can you face them? Are you certain?”

“Yes, I can face them. Don’t treat me as if I’m some sort of weakling. I won’t faint on you. I promise.”

They went to the kitchen where the felonious trio was roped together. He’d been pondering the appropriate endings for them. They’d committed numerous crimes, and he could deliver them to a magistrate to be prosecuted and hanged, but then, Wilhelmina might have to testify at a public trial. If he could implement other resolutions, he would, and there would be some poetic justice attached. He liked poetic justice.

He started with Mrs. Page. The sullen harpy watched him with cold eyes, as he stared down at her and said, “I accuse you of kidnapping and attempted murder.”

She was gagged, so she had to glare out her hatred. She huffed with offense behind her kerchief. He removed it long enough for her to claim, “I didn’t kidnap or attempt to murder anyone. I’m merely a housekeeper.”

Warwick peered over at Wilhelmina. “Is that true? Is she an innocent party?”

“No. She was complicit in every act they perpetrated. I even wrote you several letters, and she burned them so I couldn’t contact you.”

Warwick spun to Mrs. Page. “I give you a choice. Wilhelmina was to be transported to Massachusetts for indenture, so there will be an opening on the ship. You may have her space and sail away from Scotland forever, or you may tarry and be hanged in the next week or two. What is it to be?”

She sputtered her outrage, incensed over his audacity, and Warwick said,

“Fine. I’ll choose for you: I’ll turn you over to the law. With my family’s connections, we’ll have you executed shortly.”

She quailed with dismay and began to protest. Had she assumed he was joking? If her conduct was ignored, who might she harm in the future? He stuffed the kerchief back in her mouth, so he didn’t have to listen to her complaints.

He shifted to the second brigand, the idiot he’d beaten in the hall. The cowardly swine had been guarding the door while Wilhelmina was assaulted on the other side. What kind of man could stand idly by as a woman was being ravaged?

He yanked the kerchief away and said, “I give you the same option. You can be transported or hanged. What is your decision?”

The dolt didn’t hesitate. “I’ll take the ship to Massachusetts.”

“A wise idea,” Warwick told him. “We’ll depart soon. You appear to know the route to the harbor, so you can lead the way.”

He replaced the kerchief, wondering why he didn’t just slit the monster’s throat, but apparently, he only had sufficient homicidal fury for one person.

Wilhelmina’s assailant had roused from his stupor, and he studied Warwick, seeming confused, as if he didn’t understand what was transpiring. Warwick leaned down and pulled him to his feet. He was wobbly and unsteady, blood still oozing from the gash on his head.

“You don’t get any choices,” Warwick said.

He marched out, his grip tight on the man’s arm. Wilhelmina and Hunter walked with them. They’d exited the cottage before the oaf realized he shouldn’t meekly comply. He tried to squirm away, but his wrists were bound, and he’d been so battered that he wasn’t strong enough to put up much of a fight.

There was a small barn behind the house, and Warwick dragged him into it. Hunter shut the door. He could read Warwick’s mind, and he’d deduced what was about to occur, so he asked Wilhelmina, “Must you stay, Miss Dobbs? Can I dissuade you?”

“Don’t worry about me,” Wilhelmina replied. “I hope I’m about to see this fiend punished in a manner that guarantees he can never inflict himself on another female.”

“That’s definitely my plan,” Warwick said.

Warwick jerked away the man’s gag and shoved him down on a stack of hay.

“What are you going to do to me?” the lout asked.

“I’m going to hang you,” Warwick said. “What would you suppose?”

The fellow scoffed, as if Warwick wasn't serious. "You are not hanging me."

"You kidnapped Miss Dobbs, and she was your captive. What would you suggest as a suitable penalty for your conduct?"

"Mrs. Milton paid me. I was simply following orders."

"I don't care if you were paid. If I hadn't arrived when I did, you'd have raped her—and perhaps even strangled her to death."

"She's been teasing me for days. She was asking for it."

Warwick hit him so hard that he was lifted off the ground. He curled into a ball, wheezing, more blood flowing. Hunter stood over him, while Warwick searched the stalls and found a rope. He tied a noose and threw it over an exposed beam, testing the sturdiness of the wood to ensure it could hold plenty of weight.

Then he hauled the villain up again and draped the noose around his neck.

It was at this point that the dunce finally recognized the full extent of the jam he was in. "You can't proceed, Mr. Stone! You're in Scotland. We have laws against murder."

"This isn't murder. This is justice. I could turn you over to the authorities, but then, you'd be allowed to loaf in a jail cell until your trial."

"I'd be fine with that," the man hastily said.

"Well, the problem for you is that *I* don't wish to delay. And there's no reason to, is there? You can't deny your perfidy. I witnessed it with my own two eyes."

"I didn't do anything she didn't want me to do."

"You are a slow learner."

Warwick hit him again, even harder, and he collapsed to his knees. Wilhelmina was stoically watching all, and Warwick said to her, "Would you step outside for me? I wish you would."

"No. I am his victim; I should be here."

"You say that now, but I'm not positive you comprehend how violent this will be. I couldn't bear for you to be distraught later on."

"I won't be distraught. I swear I won't."

Warwick gaped at Hunter, seeking his brother's opinion again, and Hunter simply shrugged again. Wilhelmina was very determined. If she deemed it necessary to observe the conclusion, Warwick wouldn't force her out.

He bent down, tugged the pummeled cretin to his feet yet again, and asked him, "What's your name?"

"Horace."

“Have you any last words, Horace?”

Horace peered over at Wilhelmina and said, “Miss Dobbs! Stop him! He’s a maniac!”

“I warned you that you’d be sorry,” she said in response.

Warwick seized him by the throat. “Don’t speak to her. Don’t look at her. Look at me!”

Evidently, Horace’s direct plea for mercy was too much for Wilhelmina. She whipped away and left the barn which, in Warwick’s view, was for the best.

“I was just having a little fun with her,” Horace said to Warwick. “I didn’t mean any harm.”

Warwick snorted. “And you claim *I* am a maniac.”

“I . . . I . . . shouldn’t have scared her. I apologize.”

“You’re about to meet your Maker, so that’s probably a good attitude to have.”

Hunter located an old crate and balanced Horace on it. He had to brace Horace so he didn’t topple to the floor. Horace should have been brawling with outrage, but he was so beaten down that he didn’t have the energy to fight and, Warwick figured, it likely seemed like a bizarre dream. He’d soon discover that it was very real.

“Horace,” he solemnly stated, “I charge you with kidnapping, attempted rape, and attempted murder of Wilhelmina Dobbs. Those are hanging offenses, and I sentence you to die for them.”

“You can’t do this!” the man wailed, proving that he didn’t quite grasp the consequences winging toward him.

Warwick kicked the crate away, and Horace swung free, the rope cutting into his neck. It took many minutes for the end to arrive, and once it appeared his last breath was spent, Hunter checked to be sure. He nodded that it was over.

“Will you bury him?” Hunter asked.

“No. The rats can have him.”

They slipped out, and Wilhelmina was waiting for him. She didn’t question him as to how it had resolved, didn’t peek in to find out for herself, and he didn’t explain. He simply wrapped his arms around her and led her to the cottage.

The carriage that would have carried her to the harbor was still parked in the drive, the horses growing restless. He returned to the kitchen with her. Mrs. Page and the other criminal immediately noticed the absence of their co-conspirator.

“Let’s get you out of here,” Warwick said to Wilhelmina. He gestured to the

front of the house. “Grab your satchel and your warmest cloak, then meet me out at the carriage. You’ll sit up in the box with me, so it will be a chilly ride.”

She rushed off to fetch her things, as he and Hunter roused Mrs. Page and her accomplice. He guided them to the vehicle even though they protested and tried to lag and pull away. He tossed Mrs. Page in, and when he spun to her cohort, the idiot visually pleaded, begging to comment.

Warwick yanked his gag away, and he asked, “Where are you taking us?”

“Where do you think? I’ll deliver you to the ship, and Mrs. Page will be given over to the law.”

“Where is Horace? Isn’t he coming with us?”

Warwick spat in the dirt. “No, he’s not coming.”

“Where is he? What happened to him?”

“I merely bestowed some justice.”

Hunter added, “Be glad my brother was in a charitable mood and your friend the only one who suffered it.”

Warwick stuffed the kerchief back in the man’s mouth, threw him in too, then latched the door.

Hunter smirked and said, “Sometimes, you really astonish me.”

Warwick shrugged. “People shouldn’t make me angry.”

“No, they definitely shouldn’t. Will Miss Dobbs be worth it?”

“Was Hannah?” Warwick inquired.

“Absolutely.”

“Then how can you even wonder about it?”

Wilhelmina walked outside. Warwick hurried over and slid her portmanteau from her hand to his.

“Everything will be all right now,” he told her.

“I know. I never had any doubt.”

Chapter Twenty-Four



“WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN? I was looking for you everywhere.”

“I went to Scotland, but I’m back now.”

“For good?”

“Yes, for good.”

Wilhelmina smiled at Charlie and ruffled his hair. She tried to hug him, but of course, he wouldn’t let her. He never liked to be coddled.

She was so glad to see him. In the time they’d been apart, she’d suffered constant visions of disaster. She’d been terrified Blanche might have sent him out of the country, as she’d attempted to do to Wilhelmina. Or that she’d finally delivered him to an orphanage, and he’d never be found again. But he was safe.

She was in London and staying at Lord Swindon’s town house. He wasn’t in residence, and she wondered what he’d think once he returned and discovered she was loafing in an upstairs bedchamber.

He was still at Hill Haven and straightening out the mess there. Blanche had been laid low by an apoplexy, and Cassandra had been forced to marry Robert Boswell. Mr. Boswell was a weaselly character, and she deemed it hilarious that Cassandra had wound up with him as her husband. He was an enormous step down from what she’d anticipated.

“I want to go home,” Charlie said. “When can we?”

She sighed. “I don’t know what will happen. We have to wait a bit more to find out.”

“I don’t like London. It’s too loud. Don’t you miss your studio? Wouldn’t you like to paint again?”

“I’m sure I’ll be able to begin soon. Maybe just not there.”

Suddenly, Edna slithered in. Since Wilhelmina had arrived, they hadn’t had a chance to chat privately. She hovered in the doorway, appearing ashamed and pathetic.

Wilhelmina hadn't chatted with Warwick either. Not in a serious way. They'd traveled to England with his brother, and he'd been with them every second, so there hadn't been an opportunity to confer over any important topics. After they were back in the city, he'd received a message from his father and had flitted off to Hill Haven too, so their issues remained unresolved.

Was he engaged to Mrs. Smithwaite? Did he still possess any affection for Wilhelmina? Because he'd rushed to Scotland to rescue her, she kept telling herself that he still loved her, but who could guess how any of it would conclude?

Lord Swindon was with him in the country. He'd pressure Warwick relentlessly, so Wilhelmina didn't expect a happy ending. Her cottage was lost to her, so where was she to live? How was she to support herself and Charlie? Would she bring Edna along too? Could she forgive Edna? Should she forgive Edna?

Evidently, they were about to learn the answers to those questions.

"Charlie," Edna said, "Wilhelmina and I have to discuss adult subjects. Go down to the kitchen and have the cook feed you."

"I'm not hungry," the little pest replied.

"I don't care. Go!"

He nearly refused, but Edna glared so furiously that he marched out.

"I still don't like London," he said as he passed by her.

She dawdled in the hall until he'd vanished, then she came in and shut the door. Wilhelmina was seated at a table by the window, and Edna tarried across the room, anxious for Wilhelmina to wave her over.

"Well . . . ?" Wilhelmina asked after an awkward pause.

The query pushed Edna into motion. She staggered over and sat down, and she started the conversation.

"I'm sorry."

"For which offense?"

"For all of them."

"Warwick told me Blanche was paying you to spy on me."

"She was and I did. Spy, I mean."

Edna peered down at her lap, unable to hold Wilhelmina's gaze.

"How else have you injured me over the years?" Wilhelmina asked. "Let's get it out in the open, so we can tabulate how many sins you've committed against me."

"The spying was the worst of it."

"That's quite a lot."

"I loved your father. Was that a sin? I was his paramour—when he wasn't lifting the skirt of someone's daughter or wife."

"I knew that about the two of you."

"I . . . I . . . think I killed him."

Wilhelmina scowled. "What are you talking about. Killed who?"

"Jefferson. The night he died, he and I quarreled. I'd caught him with Cassandra, and I was so angry. I slapped him, and he was really drunk. He stumbled and fell, but I didn't check if he was all right. I returned to the house and, the next morning, he was dead."

On the spur of the moment, Wilhelmina couldn't deduce how she felt about the confession. She'd often been on the verge of slapping her father too. "You presume his tripping and your walking away amounts to murder?"

Edna shrugged. "I've yearned to confide in you. I was positive his affair with Cassandra would imperil our security, and all I ever wanted was a stable place to live."

"With that as your goal, you were insane to attach yourself to Jefferson Dobbs."

"I realize that, but I couldn't resist him."

"It was a problem for everyone." Wilhelmina chuckled miserably. "You know what I find most exhausting about this? You ceaselessly prostrated yourself to Blanche so we could keep our cottage, and we lost it anyway."

"I'm very disgusted with myself. Can you forgive me?"

"Must I forgive you? Is it required?"

"Will you? Please?"

"You're my aunt," Wilhelmina reminded her. "Other than Charlie, you're my only relative, yet you've never liked me."

"I like you," Edna claimed. "I simply never understood you."

"Were you supposed to understand me? Was that some rule I never heard mentioned?"

"I convinced myself there was something wrong with you." Tears flooded Edna's eyes. "But there's nothing wrong with you. You're perfect just as you are."

Wilhelmina scoffed. "You're in dire straits, so you're buttering up to me. My father and I always supported you. If I cut you loose, what would become of you?"

"I admit it: I'm selfish and pathetic, and I had to be pummeled by tragedy before I recognized that I belong by your side. If I didn't have you to take care of me, what would I have?"

"Precisely," Wilhelmina fumed.

"I'm throwing myself on your mercy. I'm begging you not to be cruel. Don't separate me from you and Charlie."

Edna actually slid off her chair and onto her knees. Her head was bowed, her hands pressed together, as if in prayer, and Wilhelmina tsked with aggravation.

"Get up, Edna," she scolded. "For pity's sake. Blanche enjoyed your groveling, but I can't abide it."

Edna eased onto her chair. "I most humbly apologize, and I swear I'll be happier from now on. I won't pick and nag in the future. I promise. Just don't send me away."

"I won't send you away," Wilhelmina grumbled, figuring she was the biggest fool ever. "But you have to be serious that you'll *try* to do better. You have to learn to be content with what I can provide. Stop making me feel so guilty."

"I'll stop. I swear that too. This drama has taught me many lessons."

"I certainly hope so."

They were silent, staring, and Wilhelmina was kicking herself. She was too kind. She was too nice. She was a complete milksop.

"What will happen to us?" Edna asked. "Where will we go?"

"I have no idea."

"Have you discussed it with Mr. Stone?"

"I haven't had a single minute to get him off by himself. On the way from Scotland, his brother was with us every second. Then, the instant we arrived in town, Lord Swindon summoned him to Hill Haven."

"What could be keeping them there?"

"Blanche suffered her apoplexy," Wilhelmina said, "and Cassandra had to wed that awful Robert Boswell. Other than those two situations, I can't fathom what could be delaying them."

"Once Mr. Stone is back, will he marry you?"

"I can't imagine it. According to Blanche, he's engaged to someone else."

"He won't be horrid to us though. No matter what. I'm sure of it."

"I agree he won't be horrid, but I can't picture him being generous. We're a permanent charity case, and we're not his responsibility."

"He rode to Scotland for you," Edna pointed out. "It has to mean he's still fond of you."

"It might."

"I'm betting he'll come up to snuff and propose. I've seen how he looks at you. I've seen how he lights up when your name is uttered. Despite what that old bat, Blanche Milton, told you, you're the one he'll choose."

"We'll have to discover his father's opinion. He's a pompous ass, and he doesn't like me."

"We'll merely have to persuade him you're wonderful," Edna said.

"That might be more of a burden than I can bear to assume. You know me. I loathe arrogant prigs. He believes he and his son are too far above me."

"He's just like your father, and you deftly handled Jefferson. Why can't you *handle* Lord Swindon too? You simply have to coax him into giving you what you want."

"And what would that be?"

"Why, Warwick of course. How will you ever be happy unless he winds up being yours forever?"



WILHELMINA ENTERED LORD SWINDON'S town house. A footman greeted her and took her cloak and bonnet. It had been an eternity since she'd stayed in a residence with a full staff of servants, and she was delighted to be skillfully assisted. It was lovely to be coddled.

She'd pretended she had to run some errands, but she'd been walking all afternoon. She didn't have any money for shopping, but she'd been suffocating in the quiet mansion, so she'd snuck away.

Warwick had been gone for a month. He and his father were still at Hill Haven. What could be occupying them? She'd asked the butler, and he'd supplied the bland and uninformative reply that Blanche needed them.

She wished Warwick would come home, yet she wished he wouldn't come home too. Why hadn't he written? Didn't he realize how distressed she was? Or that she'd like to have some answers as to how her life would unfold? Had he thought about her at all? With his not bothering to pen a letter, she had to accept that he didn't miss her and hadn't contemplated her, and the notion was incredibly depressing.

She pondered him constantly.

On one pitiful occasion, she'd needled a housemaid about his betrothal, and

the girl had insisted there hadn't been any news, but then, she'd claimed she wasn't privy to the family's secrets. What was true? What wasn't?

Her head was still spinning over recent events. She'd been betrayed, accused of harlotry, then evicted. She'd been tricked and manipulated, then whisked away by kidnappers. She'd been imprisoned, nearly raped, nearly sold into indenture and shipped to Massachusetts. Only Warwick's timely appearance had saved her from catastrophe.

Warwick had killed the fiend, Horace, for her, and when she reflected on that terrible day, it didn't seem real. She hadn't been aware that she possessed such bloodthirsty tendencies, but apparently, she could be very vindictive.

She didn't regret the penalty Warwick had imposed, and she'd devised numerous justifications for their conduct. Mainly, if they'd had Horace arrested and prosecuted, she'd have gladly demanded he be hanged, then she'd have stood at the gallows and watched him be executed. She was that enraged over what had occurred. She was that shocked and disgusted.

By Warwick implementing immediate punishment, they'd simply speeded up the ending. Why lament? Well, she *wasn't* lamenting. What did that fact reveal about her genuine character?

In her view, the violent incident bound them even more tightly, but what was he thinking? What was so accursedly vital at Hill Haven that he couldn't leave?

She had a significant comment to share with him: She might be increasing. The past week, she'd felt . . . different. Her body was different, her moods different, her bosom different. She was smiling on the inside.

If he ultimately told her he was engaged to Rowena Smithwaite, how would she proceed? If she blurted out her situation, he'd probably offer to marry her, but she didn't want a husband who wed her out of duty. She wanted it to be out of affection and mutual esteem.

During her lengthy stroll, she'd decided she would be silent about the quandary until she was informed about Mrs. Smithwaite. Which way would the cards fall? If Warwick had no plans for her, she'd have to make some of her own. Where could she go? How would she support herself? Could she retrieve the last of her father's paintings from Blanche?

When Blanche had tossed her out, she'd kept them, but Wilhelmina could sell them for quite a substantial sum. It would crush her to part with them, but she'd do it for Edna and Charlie. She'd sell some of her own work too and earn an income. She'd

find a patron who would be willing to aid a female artist. She had to stop believing her talent had no value. It had tons of value, and she had to start acting like it.

If Warwick had no desire to preserve their connection, might he help her launch her career? Might he help her locate a safe, affordable spot to live? Those were the dilemmas that had plagued her all day, but unless she talked to him, she couldn't choose a path.

She'd only trudged home after the sun was setting. It was late autumn, so night came early, and she'd been too cold to continue on. She was back at the manor, feeling lonely and miserable.

The footman yanked her out of her dreary reverie, mentioning that she'd received a letter, and she excitedly assumed it would be from Warwick. Instead, she saw that it was from Cassandra, and she growled with frustration. Why would the horrid shrew suppose Wilhelmina would like to hear from her?

The footman pointed out that there was a fire lit in the front parlor and he hoped she'd warm herself. Normally, she'd have headed upstairs to wash and change, but she was shivering, and the idea of a heated room was wonderful.

She went into the pretty salon, and she dawdled by the hearth, letting him pour her a whiskey before she shooed him out. Anymore, she was such gloomy company, and she wouldn't force him to tarry and put up with her.

Initially, she didn't intend to read Cassandra's screed, and she seriously considered throwing it in the flames unopened, but curiosity won out.

She flicked the seal and snorted at Cassandra's woeful words: She'd been ruined by Mr. Boswell, so her life had been destroyed. The strangest news was that they were living with his parents, in their tiny house, rather than at Hill Haven. She detested them, and they detested her too, but then, she wasn't particularly likeable.

In the final paragraph, Cassandra asked—if Wilhelmina eventually wound up somewhere suitable—if Cassandra could live with her.

Wilhelmina had just swallowed a swig of her liquor, and at the entreaty, she choked, coughed, and laughed a tad hysterically. Then she stuffed the missive in a pocket. She had to show it to Edna who would be even more humored than Wilhelmina.

Footsteps sounded out in the foyer, male ones, and her pulse raced with the expectation that it might be Warwick. But it was Lord Swindon. She hadn't realized he was back, and she suspected the footman had slyly lured her into the empty room so the Earl could catch her by herself when she was chilled, untidy, and unprepared to

verbally spar.

He waltzed in, looking handsome and debonair, and he was grinning as if he knew a secret she didn't.

"Ah, Miss Dobbs," he said, and he was smiling, "there you are."

"Lord Swindon." She didn't curtsy or even nod in his direction.

After the horrid month she'd endured, if he thought he could nag or insult her, he was in for a surprise. She was in no mood to be chastised, and she especially wouldn't listen to any snide remarks about her father, her lack of ancestry, or how she was too lowly to consort with his precious son.

Lord Swindon's opinion had ceased to concern her. Whatever happened between her and Warwick, they would decide on the resolution, and Lord Swindon could jump off a cliff.

The footman followed him in and poured him a whiskey too, without his having to request it. The Earl took it without even glancing at the boy; he simply stuck out his hand and the boy slipped it to him. The motion was so haughty and so imperious that he might have been a king being served by a peasant.

Warwick liked to brag about his family's aristocratic blood, and here it was, on full display.

"How are you?" he inquired as he walked over to stand next to her. "Are you recovering from your ordeal?"

"I'm quite recovered, but how are things at Hill Haven? Is Blanche still indisposed?"

"Alas, I fear poor Blanche will never be the same. It was a massive physical collapse, and she's totally paralyzed. Her nurse claims her eyes are alert, but she can't speak to tell anyone what she needs."

"Will she live long?"

"The doctor says probably not. Her condition is very dire."

"I hate to hear it. I had my differences with her, but I never like to wish ill luck on another person."

"That's my view exactly."

"I received a letter from Cassandra," she said, "and she's miserable."

"She had some big dreams, but Mr. Boswell isn't a swain any female would like to have for a husband. I don't pity her though. As I told them both, they've made their bed, and now, they have to lie in it."

"She alluded to problems at the estate, so she's having to reside with his

parents. She's very irked about it."

"Yes, well, Mr. Boswell's parents weren't keen to have her move in either. She's a nuisance, and my goodness, but doesn't she like to complain? From how she carries on, you'd think she was a princess."

"She's always acted like one," Wilhelmina agreed, "but what issue has arisen?"

"It's an incredible tangle. I'll let Warwick explain it. He's been unraveling the whole mess for me."

"Is he coming home soon?"

"Yes, very soon," the Earl said. "Could I confide something, Miss Dobbs?"

"If you must, but please don't offend me. I'm too grouchy to be badgered."

He smirked. "You're a breath of fresh air, aren't you?"

He sipped his liquor and studied her over the rim of the glass, and her stomach muscles clenched, as if for a hard blow. Was he about to kick her out? She couldn't bear to learn the answer to that question.

But suddenly, he said, "You and I got off on the wrong foot."

"We . . . what?"

"I discovered you were Jefferson's daughter, and I automatically painted you with a bad brush."

"My father had many wicked traits, but he was a genius, and I worshipped him. You shouldn't denigrate him, or we'll quarrel, and I'd rather not fight with you."

"I wasn't about to disparage him, except to point out that he was wilder and more out of control than I was. I can't necessarily castigate a man simply because he was a more deranged version of myself. And *you*, Wilhelmina, are not like him."

"I harbor plenty of his worst qualities. I'm arrogant and selfish. I'm amazingly talented, and I'm very vain about it. I can be reckless and negligent, and I'm never sorry when I am."

"That sounds like Jefferson to me, so you're definitely his child. Do you ever behave yourself when the situation requires it?"

"Despite what you imagine, I grew up in palaces and manor houses, and I can—usually—behave."

He chuckled at that. "You love Warwick, don't you?"

She shrugged, hoping she appeared nonchalant. "Maybe."

"I'm sure he loves you too."

"There's been a rumor to that effect."

"He insists you're too stubborn to make good choices."

“He’s correct.”

“Don’t be stubborn about this.”

“About what?” she asked.

Footsteps echoed out in the foyer again, and he said, “I believe that’s Warwick now.”

She gasped with delight. “He’s home? You rat! Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I wanted to have your undivided attention for a few minutes.”

“You had it, but you should be aware that I’ve met two of your sons, and they warned me to never be sequestered in a room with you. I was on guard the entire time.”

Warwick marched in, and he looked dashing as ever, his color high, his eyes merry. His golden hair gleamed in the candlelight. He smiled at her, and she suffered such a wave of joy that she nearly burst into tears.

He hurried over and pulled her close. He kissed her sweetly, tenderly, right in front of his father.

Lord Swindon clucked his tongue like a fussy chaperone. “We’ll have none of that until the details are settled.” He actually drew Warwick away from her, as he said to Wilhelmina, “I’m very old-fashioned about amour. There can be no mischief unless things are official.”

Warwick scowled at his father. “You exhausting roué! Since when are you old-fashioned? Get out of here and let me talk to her.”

“I shouldn’t leave you alone,” his father said. “From the gossip I’ve heard, I doubt you can restrain yourselves.”

“You’ll just have to risk it,” Warwick said.

Lord Swindon huffed with mock irritation. “I shall be outside. Summon me when you’re finished.”

“You will be the first to know,” Warwick told him.

Lord Swindon winked at Wilhelmina. “Remember, Miss Dobbs. You will not be stubborn.”

“I’ll try not to be, but it depends on what he’s about to ask me.”

He sauntered out, and she and Warwick stood like statues until the door was shut, then they fell into each other’s arms. They hugged forever, feeling as if they’d arrived precisely where they were meant to be.

“Where have you been?” she inquired. “I was beginning to worry that you might never return. Have you any idea of how much I’ve missed you?”

"It can't have been more than I missed you, but I've been busy."

"So your father tells me, but that's *all* he would tell me. The servants too. What have you been doing?"

"It's a long, bizarre story," he said. His expression was suddenly so serious that her anxiety bubbled up.

"Don't share any horrid news. I've been dawdling for a month, fretting about the past and the future, and I can't deal with even the slightest calamity."

"I bear no bad news." He paused, then added, "Well, there's one item that may be enraging, but for the most part, it's positive and terrific."

He guided her to the sofa by the fire, then he went to the sideboard and poured himself a whiskey. He brought the decanter over and refilled her glass, then he put the bottle on the table next to her.

"Is this a discussion that will require copious amounts of alcohol?" she asked.

"No, we're celebrating, so it will require many, many toasts."

"Celebrating! All right. Let's see if you can goad me into a festive mood or not."

He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, as if he was in pain. "I will confess the very worst thing straight out. I should have mentioned it on the trip from Scotland, but I couldn't distress you more than you already were."

"I'm not distressed any longer. Not much anyway. What is it?"

"After Blanche sent you away, she smashed out the windows in your studio."

"I knew that. I was still there when she smashed them."

"Then she burned your paintings."

Wilhelmina froze. "All of them?"

"Yes. She built several bonfires and had the footmen throw every canvas onto the piles. They burned to ash, but that is my sole piece of hideous information. We will grieve over your lost work for a few seconds, but only for a few. In my opinion, the empty space in the studio indicates you'll have to start creating again."

Her shoulders slumped. "I wish Blanche was in possession of her mental faculties. I'd like to confront her for being such a shrew. She was a patron of the arts, but she never liked me being an artist—because I was a female."

"Don't be sad about this," he said.

"I'm not sad. I'm really, really angry, but with her incapacitated, I can't avenge myself. Were you ever inside my old cottage? Were my father's paintings on the walls?"

"They appeared to be, and they were unharmed."

“That’s a relief.” If Warwick separated himself from her, she would have the paintings to sell, but from how he was smiling, she suspected she wouldn’t be going anywhere.

“Guess why I was in the cottage in the first place,” he said.

“Why?”

“I was searching for you. I was convinced Blanche had imprisoned you, so I rushed in to rescue you, but I stumbled on Cassandra and Robert Boswell instead.”

“She wrote to me, and she’s incredibly upset at your father and *his* father for forcing them to the altar.”

“Mr. Boswell wasn’t aware she was a fallen woman, and once her past was exposed, he wasn’t too keen to be shackled to her either. His father urged him to proceed because they assumed, by marrying her, he would become the owner of Hill Haven.”

Wilhelmina frowned. “I would have expected it too, but Cassandra claimed there was a problem with the estate, so she’s moved in with his parents. What happened?”

“Blanche Milton was bankrupt!” he declared with an enormous amount of glee.

Wilhelmina tsked with astonishment. “No! She seemed so stable financially.”

“Her difficulties started when her husband was still alive. They constantly lived beyond their means, and it grew worse after Mr. Milton died. Blanche borrowed to stay afloat, and she had dozens of mortgages that were all in arrears. Her creditors showed up as her Will was being read, and they put the property into immediate foreclosure.”

Wilhelmina shook her head, not able to fathom the notion. “When I recollect all the parties she hosted! She often chastised *me* for not managing my money appropriately, but I never had much. The nerve!”

“Even Cassandra’s dowry was squandered. She was supposed to have had land and funds stashed away in it, but it had been raided ages ago.”

Wilhelmina chuckled. “It’s lucky you didn’t glom onto her then. You’d have been tricked.”

“My accountants would have checked it out, but poor Mr. Boswell is incensed. He received nothing of value by fettering himself to her, and he’s simply been saddled with a very unhappy, very shrewish wife.”

“Could I say they probably deserve each other?”

"I enthusiastically concur." He smirked and puffed himself up. "But enough about them. I'm just getting to the best part. At least, *I* think it's the best part, and don't you dare tell me it's not."

"What is it?"

"I bought Hill Haven."

"You . . . what?"

"I purchased it from Mrs. Milton's creditors. For pennies on the pound too. It was a deal too lucrative to refuse."

She sputtered with surprise. "Why would you want it?"

"I've never owned a rural property. I was never interested in the hassle of one, but I decided I should have a home to offer to my new bride."

Her heart sank to her slippers. "You're marrying?"

"Yes, and very quickly too, if I play my cards right."

"To Rowena Smithwaite?"

He'd been pacing, and he jumped as if she'd poked him with a pin. "Gad, no! Why would you believe that?"

"The last time I spoke to Blanche, she told me you were about to betroth yourself to her. She also insisted you've sired several bastards. Have you?"

"She was lying to you, about both issues. I have no natural children, and I can't abide Rowena. I swear, if Blanche wasn't already debilitated, I would ride back to the country and render her senseless."

Wilhelmina could barely force out the question. "Who is your fiancée then?"

"You don't know? You have no idea?"

"If you've been courting someone, how would I have learned of it?"

He gaped at her as if she were deranged, then he gulped down his whiskey and smacked the empty glass on the table with a hard thud. His expression turned cunning. "You, Wilhelmina Dobbs, are the most idiotic woman who ever lived."

"I'll admit I've never been the sharpest person, but why am I currently being a dunce?"

"It's *you*, you silly girl. I'm marrying you!"

"Me? You can't choose me. Your father would never agree."

"He's changed his mind about you. He's realized you'd be perfect for me."

She scoffed. "You're joking."

"No, I'm not, and if you think you can be obstinate about this, I'll bring him in here and let him go to work on you. From how he pushed Cassandra toward that

wretch, Robert Boswell, it's clear he's an expert at manipulation."

He came over to her, dropped to a knee, and clasped her hand. There was only one reason a man put himself in that position: to propose. Was he serious? He definitely appeared to be, and she was shocked to the core of her being.

"My dearest, Wilhelmina," he said, "for many weeks now—"

"*Weeks* doesn't sound very long."

"Would you listen for once? Since the moment we met, I have been pondering a deeper connection with you."

"I might have pondered one too," she carefully said.

"Over the prior month, while we were apart, it occurred to me that I can't live without you."

"You don't mean that," she said.

"Oh, but I do, and I won't claim I'm a great catch."

"You're a terrific catch! Don't denigrate yourself to me."

"I'm rich, and I'm a member of a prominent family, but I'm stubborn—like you. I have to have my own way. I have bad habits and enjoy wicked activities. I've been the most dedicated bachelor in the world, so I haven't exactly carried on as a moral man should."

"I was raised by an *immoral* man, and I survived. I rather like immoral men. They're much more entertaining."

"I am a cad," he told her.

"Are you prepared to abandon your cad's existence? Are you eager to be a husband instead of a scoundrel? I'm inquiring because—if you hope to persuade me—you will have to promise to give up your debauched friends and depraved antics. You will have to settle down and be the husband I deserve. How will you respond to that, Warwick Stone?"

"That's easy: I love you, Wilhelmina Dobbs."

He leaned in and kissed her, and they sighed with pleasure.

"I love you too," she confessed, "but I'm not sure it matters."

"Not matter? Who gets to wed for love? Why not us?"

"I am an artist, and I will always be an artist. I stay up all night and paint until dawn. I have wild swings of emotion where I don't sleep or eat for days. If you grew exasperated and ordered me to behave differently, I'd tell you to stuff it. I'm such an odd female. Why would you want me?"

He grinned slyly. "I figured you'd pose a frivolous complaint like that, and to

counter it, I announce that I've repaired your studio. I replaced the smashed windows, and I added a few more on the west wall so you'd have more light. It's why I was there for so long; I was mending and remodeling it. It's bigger and better than it was before, but if you'd like to ever paint there again, you'll have to marry me."

"You didn't fix it!"

"I'm using my good deed to brazenly bribe you. Be my wife, and we'll make our home at Hill Haven. You can have your studio back."

Who wouldn't adore such a man? Who wouldn't adore him forever?

"You're asking *me* to be mistress of a huge manor?"

"It's mad, I know."

"I wouldn't have the faintest notion how to assume that role."

He laughed and shrugged. "So we'll hire a competent housekeeper to manage it for you."

She debated for an eternity, and her old craving for *more* was back with a vengeance. Was she about to end up with everything she'd ever yearned to have?

"Are you certain?" she said. "I'm so afraid you haven't thought this through. I'm so afraid you'll decide, later on, that I'm too peculiar, and you'll wish you hadn't proceeded."

"I've decided I like *peculiar*. I can pick whoever I'd like to be my bride, and you are this cad's pick. Say *yes*. Say you'll be mine. If you won't, how will I go on without you?"

His affection wafted out, rolling over her like a warm blanket of fondness and care. If she consented, he'd be hers for the rest of her life. He'd stand by her side, her most stalwart friend. How had she gotten so lucky?

"Before I reply," she said, "I have to tell you a little secret."

"What is it?"

"I might be having a baby."

He froze, and his jaw dropped. "You're increasing?"

"I'm not positive, but it wouldn't hurt for me to visit a midwife."

"I'm about to be a father . . ." he murmured, as if trying out the words. "Oh, gad! The poor child! With you and me for parents? We never had anyone to show us how it's accomplished."

"We'll just have to figure it out on our own."

"We're having a baby! This means you can't be stubborn, so will you marry me?"

She hesitated, letting the moment play out, letting the details sink in so she'd never forget.

He became impatient, and he clasped her waist and shook her. "Answer me, you teasing vixen! Don't keep me in suspense."

"Yes, Warwick, I will marry you. I will be this cad's pick."

He whooped with delight and jumped to his feet. He pulled her up too, then he was kissing her and kissing her. They were twirling in circles, being loud and silly. When they crashed into a table and knocked it over, Lord Swindon opened the door and peeked in.

"What's happening?" he asked. "You're not fighting, are you?"

"We're not fighting," Warwick told him. "We're celebrating."

"Am I about to have another daughter-in-law?"

"Yes, and guess what else?"

"What?"

"You're about to be a grandfather."

Wilhelmina imagined it was hard to surprise Lord Swindon. He looked like a fellow who'd heard it all in his fifty years, but Warwick had astonished him.

"I'm about to be a . . . a . . . grandfather?" Lord Swindon said. "Then we better send for a Special License. Miss Dobbs, might you be available tomorrow for your wedding? Are you ready to join my family?"

"I'm ready, Lord Swindon, and since I'm about to be your daughter, you should probably call me Wilhelmina."

The End



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CHERYL HOLT IS A *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and Amazon “Top 100” bestselling author who has published over sixty novels.

She’s also a lawyer and mom, and at age forty, with two babies at home, she started a new career as a commercial fiction writer. She’d hoped to be a suspense novelist, but couldn’t sell any of her manuscripts, so she ended up taking a detour into romance where she was stunned to discover that she has a knack for writing some of the world’s greatest love stories.

Her books have been released to wide acclaim, and she has won or been nominated for many national awards. She is considered to be one of the masters of the romance genre. For many years, she was hailed as “The Queen of Erotic Romance,” and she’s also revered as “The International Queen of Villains.” She is particularly proud to have been named “Best Storyteller of the Year” by the trade magazine *Romantic Times BOOK Reviews*.

She lives and writes in Hollywood, California, and she loves to hear from fans. Visit her website at www.cherylholt.com.

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